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Adam Jones
A Tombstone & Speedy Novel
By W. C. TUTTLE

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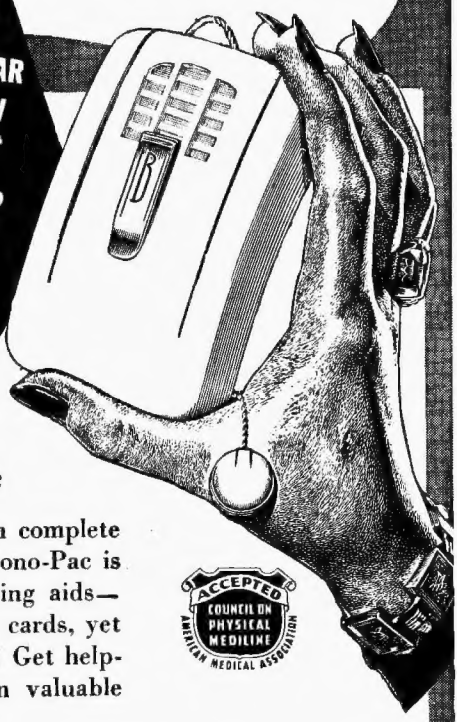

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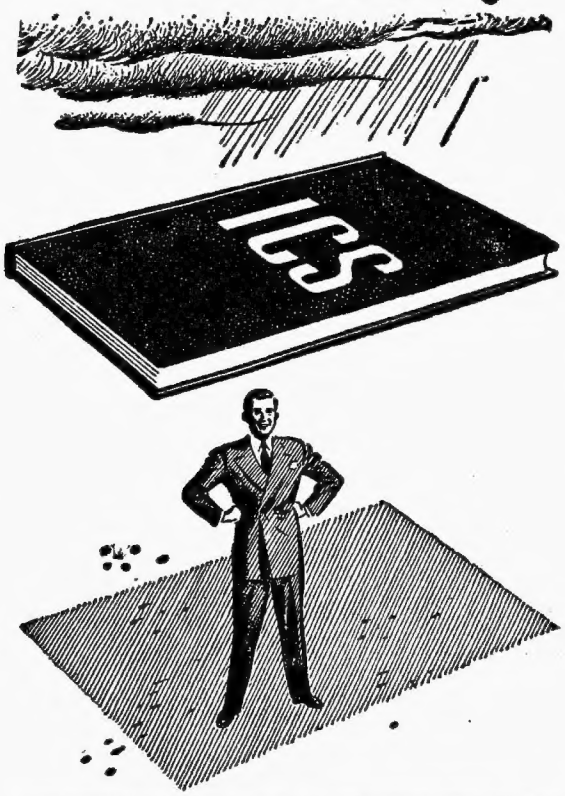

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EXCITING WESTERN

VOL. 14, No. 1 A THRILLING PUBLICATION SEPTEMBER, 1947

ALIAS ADAM JONES

By W. C. TUTTLE

When Speedy Smith is kidnaped by masked hombres and Tombstone Jones inherits a ranch to which he has no legal claim, the rollicking sleuths head for a gun jamboree! A Tombstone and Speedy novel 11

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Lazy Budge Hale proves he knows how to meet trouble.

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Our tenderfoot learns more trail-herding language.

CRISIS ON THE CURLY Q.....Don Alviso 95
Stew Tyler's bout with red-eye has strange results.

MEN OF THEIR WORD.....William O'Sullivan 101
Paddy Carney and Cooney Banks make an agreement.

TRAIL BLAZERS.....Captain Ranger 6
A meaty department dedicated to the great outdoors.

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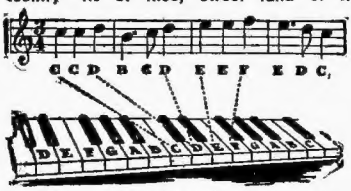

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THE Thanksgiving turkey is an old American tradition. Raising the luscious drumsticks and plenty of white meat on a wholesale scale is a fast-growing industry out in the West.

Many of the Western states offer good opportunities for turkey ranching. And turkeys, like cattle, set out on the open range will do a good deal of their foraging for themselves.

The custom of making turkeys the holiday dinner bird began with the Pilgrim forefathers clear across the country and moved westward with the changing frontier of the United States. Yet raising them in the West is as it should be.

The wild turkeys the Puritans found in New England were not originally native to that part of the country. They simply migrated from their ancestral home long before the Pilgrims got the idea and were in reality direct descendants of the Mexican wild turkey. So were all the other wild turkeys found spread across the continent.

It's a Mexican Bird

Since authorities are pretty well agreed that all present varieties of our domestic turkey have descended from North American wild stock, it follows, believe it or not, that our most uniquely American dinner dish was originally a Mexican bird.

The great, glistening Bronze variety, still the turkey grower's and the turkey eater's favorite, was even domesticated first by some of the ancient Indian tribes of the Southwest. The Indians raised them not for culinary purposes, but for their fine, decorative feathers—a favorite item of Indian ornament.

Big Business

Today on an increasing number of Western turkey ranches, it is merely a case of the turkeys coming home to roost. They belong there. And they do well there, particularly in a dry, or semi-dry climate.

Turkey ranches have become big business in the West. Texas alone raises some five million of the birds annually, making it the nation's leading turkey producing state. Every second year Cuero, about half way between San Antonio and Port Lavaca and one of Texas' big turkey-packing centers, holds a regular turkey festival known as the Turkey Trot.

Thousands of prize birds, lead by a band complete with comely, high-stepping, baton-twirling drum majorettes, are paraded down Cuero's main street followed by gay floats carrying the "Queen" of the festival and her attendants. As usual it is a joyous occasion for all concerned but the turkeys. Most of the handsome birds are marched right on to the waiting pens of the big packing plants where they are made ready for the tables of a turkey-hungry nation.

Grazing Turkeys

Some of the bigger turkey ranchers in Texas and the West raise as many as ten or twenty thousand birds a year. Such large flocks are generally grazed like sheep, being tended by regular turkey herders hired by the owner of the turkey spread.

Grazing turkeys on open range requires a lot of space and a turkey herder going off into the back country with his flock usually takes care of between fifteen hundred and two thousand birds—with the aid of a good, trained "sheep" dog to help him. His caravan makes quite a picture. Generally it consists of three or four wagons.

First is the wagon in which he makes his living quarters, likely fitted up with the cook stove chimney sticking through the canvas top. The other wagons contain roosts built in the shape of a letter A. Turkeys like to roost at night. If in desert country, or at a dry camp, the turkey herder has to carry along, often in an extra wagon, water for his flock, his stock and himself.

Camp is generally moved once a week or every ten days, not so much to provide the

birds with fresh forage—feed is taken along for the birds by the herder—but to keep them on clean ground. Clean ground plays a large part in keeping the birds healthy and free from disease.

They Spook Easy

If you think a turkey herder's life is a cinch, guess again. It is quite a specialized job. Turkeys will spook easily, especially on moonlight nights, and stampede just like cattle. Rounding up a turkey flock after a sudden night-time stampede is no easy matter, a chore to try the patience of a Job—even with a dog to help.

In addition the herder and his dog must protect the flock against prowling coyotes and skunks, in country where the striped kitty is part of the natural scenery.

Big turkey spreads of the turkey herder type are operated in Idaho, Washington, Oregon, Texas and perhaps other Western sections favorable to that style of feathered ranching. Some large spreads and many turkey ranches are, on the other hand, operated under fence, the birds being moved from pasture to pasture as the season progresses.

Small Flocks

And of course a great many small farm flocks of birds are raised annually throughout the country—from Maine to California, from Minnesota down to Florida—as part of diversified farm operations. These birds, however, are not raised on special "turkey ranches" as the term is understood in the West.

In any event whether or not you eventually contemplate a full scale turkey spread, it is wise to start in a relatively small way. And start with good quality pure bred birds. It costs no more to feed and raise to market size a pure bred turkey than it does to raise a scrub. Yet the difference in the bringing price between the two is considerable.

Standard Varieties

Among the several standard pure bred turkey varieties recognized by the American Poultry Association are the Bronze, White Holland, Bourbon Red, Narragansett, Black and Slate.

Recently some turkey breeders have been specializing in developing succulent, pint-sized birds—just large enough for a small family to get away with at one or two sittings, with maybe enough left-over for a

[*Turn page*]

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turkey pie at the end. This is part of a definite drive to make turkeys part of the year around dinner menu, rather than just a once or twice a year holiday feast. It should be good for the turkey business as a whole, and perhaps explains in part the recent expansion of turkey raising as a special farm enterprise.

Turkeys can be raised successfully with very simple equipment. The capital outlay required in starting may therefore be quite modest. But care in watching the birds, and cleanliness in raising them are of paramount importance, if you hope to build up disease-free turkey flocks.

Cleanliness means clean range, clean quarters, clean feed and clean water available at all times. In addition young turkeys should be protected against dampness, and damp, cold or stormy weather. They can stand a considerable amount of dry cold, however.

Breeding Pens

Until a few years ago breeding flocks were customarily permitted free range during the breeding and laying season. The practise was wasteful, costly in dollars and cents to the producer, because of the difficulty of finding the birds' nests and gathering the eggs daily. Modern practise is to keep breeding flocks in good-sized breeding pens, enclosed by a six-foot high hog-proof fence.

Turkeys are not likely to fly over such a fence because of the difficulty of resting on the thin strand of top wire.

Out in New Mexico, "Land of Enchantment," more than half that State's sizable annual turkey output comes from Colfax county. The turkey ranches center around Maxwell, thirty miles south of the Colorado line.

Maxwell's population is less than five hundred, but it is a colorful, historic old town. To the north is Raton Pass and towering peaks of the Sangre de Cristo range. Ruts made by the cumbersome covered wagons which once traveled the old Santa Fe trail are still discernible. You can still view the ruins of the Clifton House, an oldtime overnight stop for stagecoaches and patronized on occasion by "Billy the Kid"—between or, possibly, on cattle rustling forays.

Glamour and Enterprise

Most of the Colfax county turkeys are raised on irrigated farm lands of the Maxwell irrigation district. On one big turkey ranch—just to show how the modern West

combines the old glamour with up-to-the-minute enterprise—turkey poults arrive at the spread by plane when they are from six to twenty-four hours old. Nature has provided turkey poults with a yolk sac that keeps the birds alive for the first eight hours.

After that it is up to the rancher to see that the baby birds get well started on their way to becoming lush, fat, marketable turkeys. First job is to teach the poults to eat. Each young poult must be given individual lessons by dipping its tiny bill into water and watching to see if it swallows. The process is repeated as a double check. Similarly each little bill must be dipped into starting mash to give the bird the no-how of self-nourishment.

Poults from three days to two weeks old are especially susceptible to several devastating diseases and must be handled with extra care to prevent excessive loss.

Alfalfa and Grain

After the turkeys have begun to grow up they are—on the New Mexico ranch in question—grazed on alfalfa pasturage, being moved to new ground each week. Later the birds are 'finished off' by supplementing the alfalfa diet with grain to add the plump poundage that puts profits in the turkey raiser's pocket.

More or less the same procedure, barring the ultra-modern plane delivery of the baby turkeys, is followed out on a close to three-thousand acre ranch near Deer Lodge, Montana, where raising is the spread's principal enterprise.

The ranch raises some four thousand birds a year, specializing in quality turkeys for the Thanksgiving and Christmas holiday trade, and selling its output mostly to class hotels, restaurants and high-grade meat markets in such Montana city centers as Butte, Anaconda, and Deer Lodge.

Like the New Mexico birds, these Montana turkeys are raised on alfalfa and grass pastures. Then they are fattened on grain and made ready for marketing early in November.

The same pattern is generally followed throughout the Western turkey ranching states. Turkey ranching involves a lot of hard work. It is no get-rich-quick proposition, and the business has its ups and downs like any other agricultural endeavor. But raising turkeys in the West, or elsewhere, is an interesting enterprise. There is money in it—if you know something about poultry

(Continued on page 109)

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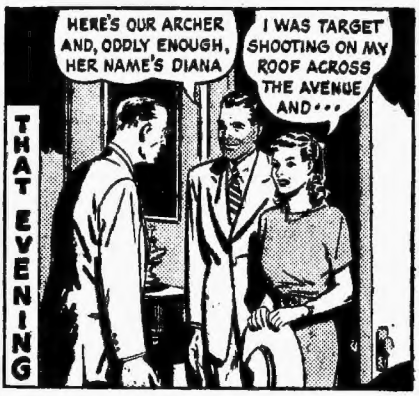

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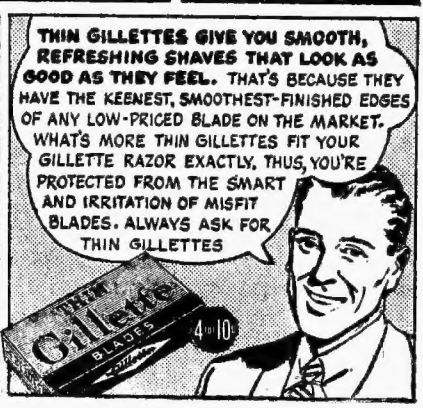
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"I've done found the per-fume," Tombstone said. "It's Marion. She's here, hog-tied and gagged!"

ALIAS ADAM JONES

By W. C. TUTTLE

When Speedy Smith is kidnaped by masked hombres and Tombstone Jones inherits a ranch to which he has no claim, the two rollicking range sleuths are in for a bullet jamboree!

CHAPTER I

Road Agents

TWO men met in front of the Polar Saloon in Silver Butte, and one of them said:

"Jist how hot is it t'day by yore thee-mometer, Jim?"

"Well, I'll tell yuh," sighed the other man. "It only goes up to a hundred and thirty above zero. I wondered how much she'd stand without blowin' up, so I lit a match and held it under the bulb. Do yuh know what happened?"

"Blew up?"

"Nope—dropped ten de-grees."

A Complete Tombstone and Speedy Novel

TOMBSTONE JONES

Tombstone Jones and Speedy Smith came down from the depot, carrying their war-bags. A freight-train brought them in from the north, dusty, red-eyed from the heat.

They dropped their warbags in front of the Polar Saloon and sank down in two rickety chairs.

Tombstone was at least seven feet tall in his high-heels and sombrero, and with a physique that any sand-hill crane would love. He had a long, lean face, high cheekbones, sad eyes and a wide mouth.

Tombstone's hips were so narrow that he often threatened to wear suspenders on his gun-belt.

Speedy Smith was a small replica of Tombstone Jones. Speedy was five feet, seven inches tall and, after a long rainy spell, he might weigh about a hundred pounds. As far as physical appearances were concerned, they were just a pair of drifting, down-at-the-heel cowpokes, who hadn't been eating regularly. As a matter of fact, they were employed by the Cattlemen's Association—range detectives, if you please—or not. Not ornamental, not smart, not very durable to look at, but effective in their own dumb ways. Tombstone could not read nor write, but he claimed to be the "best dog-goned, single-handed liar that ever reached for a saddle-horn and got his hands full of grass."

Jim Keaton, secretary of the association, had wired them:

GO TO PAINTED FORK IN PINTADO VALLEY STOP ADVISE CAUTION STOP WILL MAIL INSTRUCTIONS.

Those stops always bothered Tombstone. Well, they were in Silver Butte, and their next move was to either buy a pair of horses and saddles, or take the stage to Painted Fork.

"It ain't lookin' at no broncs in this kind of heat," Speedy said wearily. "We'll take the stage. It only runs at night, when it's cool."

"Cool, huh?" queried Tombstone. "If that's a fact, I'll betcha we don't git no stage before January. Yuh mean—at night, when it's kinda shady, don't yuh? Or does that blasted sun ever go down?"

"It's the hottest day I ever seen," complained Speedy, and added quickly, "Don't you even start to lie about the heat yuh've seen."

"When yuh've seen what yuh've seen, yuh don't have to lie, Speedy. One time me and Shorty Devine was pilotin' six mules, packed with ninety percent dynamite over the Funeral Range, headin' for a big minin' camp. You talk about heat! I'm leadin' the train, and all to once I seen that the dynamite was fryin' out of them boxes and runnin' down over the hides of them six mules. Fact is, they was soaked with the stuff. We was travelin' awful rocky trails, and you know how pack-mules are allus strikin' sparks with their shoes."

FOR a moment Tombstone paused to take a deep breath, then went on.

"Well, sir, I stopped the outfit and yelled back to Shorty. He got past them mules and I explained my fears. 'Shorty, we've got to stay right here until cold weather,' I said. 'All we need is one spark in that there niter-glycerine, and they won't even find enough of us to fit onto a pair of wings.'

"Shorty jist grinned, got off and picked up the lead mule's front foot. Yuh know what? Every danged shoe had melted off them six mules. Nothin' left to strike a spark. We took that outfit through all right. There wasn't anythin' left in them boxes, except sawdust, but they clipped them mules, stuffed the drill-holes with hair, and went right ahead, breakin' rock. Yeah, it's hot here today, but not like that."

"You almost give me a chill," said Speedy dryly.

A small, bow-legged man came across the street, looked them over carefully, and sat down with them. He had a long mustache of rather a greenish-purple shade, and what hair showed around his ears was about the same color.

"I'm in my second childhood," he said. "Done had my hair and mustache dyed black yesterday, and look how she come out. If a miracle don't happen, I'm killin' me a barber. Originally a gray—and look at me! Who ever seen green and purple hair?"

"We did," said Tombstone soberly. "You look real nice. In love?"

"Yea-a-ah—kinda. My hair used to be black. Pink wouldn't be so bad. Even a red ain't uncommon—but green and purple!"

"Do yuh live here?" asked Speedy.

"Well, I kinda split my livin' between here and Painted Fork. I'm the stage-driver."

"Yeah? Fine. We'll ride to Painted Fork with yuh tonight."

"Yuh will? That's fine. Goin' to Painted Fork, eh? My name's Andy Bowers, and I'm glad to meet yuh."

"My name's Jones and his'n is Smith," offered Tombstone.

"Jones, huh? Yuh ain't kin to John Adam Jones, are yuh?"

"I'm his fav'rite nephew."

"Yuh are? Gosh almighty! You ain't Adam Jones, are yuh?"

Tombstone looked at him curiously. "How'd you know that?" he asked. "Has my fame pre-ceded me?"

"No, I dunno about that. Well, well! Huh! The stage pulls out at eight o'clock. See yuh then. So-long."

Andy Bowers bow-legged his way down the street.

"Why lie to the little feller?" Speedy said. "You've been a nephew of every Jones we ever heard about. Some day, feller, yuh're goin' t' be sorry."

"The Jones' are awful nice folks, Speedy."

"Some day yuh're goin' to be a nephew to a Jones who ain't nice."

"I'll disown him, if I do. Man, I'd like to get cooled off."

"Adam Jones," said Speedy thoughtfully. "Sounds like he might be the first Jones. Prob'ly married Eve."

"We're a awful old family, Speedy. We go back a long ways."

SPEEDY SMITH

"And never have a round-trip ticket," added Speedy. "Let's see if we can find somethin' cold to drink."

Elmer Potts, deputy sheriff, from Painted Fork, came to Silver Butte late that afternoon. Elmer was short and fat, bow-legged as a barrel-stave, and with a none too happy outlook on life. Elmer rode in a top-buggy, and sat rather sideways on the seat. That was the reason he didn't ride a horse, rather favoring a side-sitting position.

Andy Bowers, the stage-driver, met and talked with Elmer, and then introduced him to Tombstone and Speedy.

"Elmer tells me you two are headin' for Painted Fork," remarked the deputy, as they leaned on the Polar bar. "The reason I said that is that I'm ridin' back after it cools off, and one of yuh can ride with me."

"I'd be glad to do it, Elmer," said Tombstone quickly which settled the matter, as far as Speedy was concerned.

They sat down. "Yuh seem to favorin' yourself a little when a-settin' down, Elmer," Andy said.

"Yeah," sighed Elmer, "I do. Last night, bein' awful hot, I slept in my birthday suit. That is, I aimed to, but when I set down on the aidge of the bed —I set m'self on a black widder spider."

"Did she bite yuh, Elmer?" asked Andy.

"Must of," nodded Elmer. "I ain't

never knowed of one to pack a gun or a knife."

"Didja go high, Elmer?"

"Ten feet," replied Elmer soberly. "Ceilin' hampered me."

The four of them ate supper together. Elmer called Tombstone "Adam," indicating that Andy had told him what Tombstone had said about him being a nephew of John Adam Jones. Speedy went to the depot with Andy to pick up some freight, and they were there when a passenger train stopped.

ONLY one passenger descended, a rather fat, young man, well-tailored, wearing glasses. He had four bags—expensive-looking, too, all marked H.A.W. The young man seemed at a loss what to do next. The train pulled out. Speedy went a little closer, looking the young man over.

"I want my bags taken to the—er—stage depot," said this young man. "You are the porter, I presume."

"Name's Smith," said Speedy soberly. "Yuh mean—yuh're goin' on the stage to Painted Fork?"

"Precisely, my man. I am Harold Ashley Wentworth."

"Yuh don't mean it!" exclaimed Speedy. "Not actually!"

"Why, yes, of course I am."

"Well, can yuh imagine that!" Speedy's amazement seemed genuine.

"But about my bags."

"Oh, yeah. The stage is behind the depot, loadin' some stuff. We'll dump the valises into it there. C'mon."

Speedy took two, and after a moment of indecision, the young man took the other two. Andy, roping some boxes on the boot, took time off to consider Harold Ashley Wentworth.

"He's a-goin' to Painted Fork with us, Andy," said Speedy.

"Do yuh want to ride with me, Speedy?" asked Andy.

"I'm ridin' inside," declared Speedy. "The last time I rode on the driver's seat, somebody shot at me and I fell off. Anyway, I'm about half-out of sleep, and I'll git me some on the way."

"You jist think yuh will." Andy grinned. "You ain't never been over the road to Painted Fork."

Tombstone and Elmer were still in town, when the stage pulled out. Harold Ashley Wentworth was not at all communicative. The old stage lurched and bumped over the moonlit road, every bolt and joint in the old body protesting. Harold Ashley Wentworth managed to exclaim: "This is terrible!"

"What is?" asked Speedy.

"This stage!"

"The stage is all right—it's the road."

Harold subsided. On a smoother stretch of road Speedy asked:

"Are you a drummer?"

"Why, I—I really do not get the connection, sir. By the way, I forgot to pay you for handling my bags. Here is a quarter."

Harold reached over, just as they hit a wicked succession of ruts, and landed on top of Speedy. Somewhere in the shuffle the quarter was lost.

"Much obliged," wheezed Speedy. "When you give anythin', you shore put everythin' yuh-ve got behind it."

There was no more attempts at conversation. The road narrowed down around a grade, and Andy was obliged to drive slowly. Speedy dozed off to sleep, only to be awakened when the fast-moving stage came to an abrupt halt. But this time he landed on Harold. The door was yanked open.

"Come out of there, you two—and keep yore hands up!" a voice said sharply.

They came out, with Speedy in front. The stage had been halted on a grade.

"Hightail it, driver, and don't look back," a voice snapped.

The stage rolled on down the grade. A masked man confronted the half-asleep Speedy and Harold Ashley Wentworth. Speedy's gun was in his war-bag, on top of the stage. The moonlight was not too bright.

"All right, you two," the man said. "Keep 'em up."

"Well, do somethin', will yuh?" complained Speedy. "I'd hate to grow up, lookin' like a Josh Palm."

The masked man quickly searched them for weapons. They had none.

"I'll lead yuh," he said. "You better foller, 'cause there's a gun behind yuh. C'mon." Speedy glanced over his shoulder. It was true. Another masked man had stolen up behind them.

"My Heavens, what will happen?" exclaimed Harold weakly.

"That depends on you, feller," replied the man behind them. "Get goin'."

Their leader took them up through a wide crevice in the rocks, where they

Tombstone helped with the pulling, Speedy grabbed hold of the tail, and they snaked the bawling cow out of the pit

struck an old cattle-trail.

"Somebody has shore gone silly," Speedy said.

"We'll judge that," growled the leader.

CHAPTER II

Wrong Victim

ABOUT a mile further along the old trail, they turned into a swale which took them to a small, pole shack. From its appearance it might have been a line camp for some cow outfit. Another masked man was waiting for them. Tied to a small hitch-rack were three saddled horses.

They herded their captives into the shack and sat them down on a pole bunk. Two tallow candles, stuck into the necks of whisky bottles, furnished the illumination.

"You ain't tryin' to scare us, are yuh?" asked Speedy.

The man at the shack, evidently the leader, looked them over quietly, and shook his head. He pointed at Harold.

"Where'd he come from?" he asked.

"There was jist two of 'em on the stage," replied one of the men. "You said to bring 'em both."

"That's right."

Suddenly he pointed his finger at Speedy.

"Yuh're Jones, eh?" he said.

Speedy laughed at him. Masks and guns didn't frighten Speedy.

"This must be funny to you," snarled the man, exasperated at the attitude of Speedy.

"That's right," said Speedy. "My name's Smith."

"It is, eh? Where's Jones?"

"Go ahead and make a lot of guesses, and they'll all be wrong."

The man turned to Harold. "Where's the man's pardner?" he asked.

"I have no idea, sir," replied Harold. "Perhaps he is the man who drove the stage team."

The leader cursed their luck. One of the men had a bottle and they each took a drink.

"Well," said the leader, "all we can do is kick these two off the mesa and call it a day."

And that kicking was not a figure of speech. They took Speedy and Harold outside. One of the men pointed the direction they wanted them to go.

"It ain't over eight, nine miles to Painted Fork, right that way," he said. "If yuh don't break yore fool necks in canyons, you ought to git there in time for breakfast. Let 'em have it, boys!"

The boys did just that. Speedy Smith had never been kicked that hard before in his life. He was sure his vertebrae was shortened several inches. They didn't go very fast, because they couldn't get up any speed, but they kept going. The three men laughed and went back into the shack. Speedy stopped, and because he was in front, Harold stopped, too.

"I ain't a hair-pin yuh can bend up thataway," Speedy said. "C'mon."

They went back to the shack. The three men were having another drink. Speedy helped Harold into a saddle and gave him the reins. He cut one horse loose, moving it away carefully, after taking the lariat-rope off the saddle. Quickly he looped two ropes together, tiptoed forward, hung the loop around about six pole-ends on the corner of the cabin, and came back, getting quickly into the saddle.

"Have you ever been on a horse before?" he whispered to Harold.

"Two," whispered Harold. "I've fallen off twice."

"The third time's a charm," said Speedy. "Boot that rat-tail down thataway and keep goin'. I'll be right behind yuh. Let's go!"

Harold obeyed orders, and managed to stay on the saddle. The clatter of hoofs shocked the occupants of the shack into inactivity for the moment, and Speedy spurred past the shack, taking up the slack in that rope. The shock was considerable, and both horse and saddle buckled under the strain, but the poles pulled loose.

Then Speedy shook off the dally, and spurred after Harold. He had pulled enough poles loose to make that shack forever of the lean-to type, and let in the sod-covered roof.

He caught Harold, who was having horse trouble. The horse was broke to neck-rein, and Harold was trying to turn him by sagging back on one rein. The result was complete disagreement be-

tween them. Harold was also frightened over the prospect of the masked men catching them.

"We should have obeyed their orders," panted Harold, as they swung down onto the main road. "They—they'll hate us."

"Some men are that way," agreed Speedy. "Yuh can't satisfy 'em. But we won't worry about that, *compadre*. You hang onto that horn, and we'll go to Painted Fork where the law can save us."

"I am a little sore," complained Harold. "One of those brutes kicked me awful hard."

"Did, huh?" grunted Speedy. "Well, if the back of yore lap is any sorer than mine, I pity yuh."

THE appearance of the stage, sans passengers, meant nothing, until Andy Bowers told of the holdup and the kidnaping of his two passengers. It was only a few minutes later when Tombstone and Elmer Potts arrived in their buggy, and Buck Lorimer, the sheriff, was trying to find enough men to make up a posse. Tombstone was puzzled. He had never seen Harold Ashley Wentworth.

"I dunno who he is, but I think he's a dummer," Andy said. "Smelled like one, anyway, and he was shore duded up."

"Why'd anybody kidnap a drummer?" asked one of the men.

"Men do funny things," said Tombstone. "I knowed a feller who collected cattle brands. Said it was his hobby. They hung him one day."

"For collectin' cattle brands?" asked a man curiously.

"Yea-a-ah. Forgot to take it off the cow."

"You don't seem worried about yore pardner," said the sheriff.

"No-o-o-o," drawled Tombstone. "He ain't the kind they'll be happy with. Prob'ly pay him somethin' to go away and mind his own business."

"But we've got to find the other feller," said Elmer.

"Wait'll they get rid of Speedy," suggested Tombstone. "Mebbe he'll bring the other feller back with him."

About an hour later Speedy and Harold walked into the one hotel in Painted Fork. Harold was not as immaculate as he was when he got off the train at Silver Butte. He had lost his hat, and limped a little. Tombstone was leaning across the little hotel desk, talking with the proprietor, when they came in.

"Where yuh been all this time, Speedy?" Tombstone asked.

"Oh, we ain't so awful late," replied Speedy. "A couple of fellers had a proposition to put up to us, but when they found out my name was Smith, they wouldn't do business. Don't like Smiths. Did yuh git us a room?"

"Uh-huh."

The old hotelkeeper peered over his glasses at Harold Ashley Wentworth.

"Did you want a room, too, young man?" he asked.

"I do," replied Harold stiffly. "I want one with a bathtub large enough to cover my aching muscles with hot water."

"We ain't ever had none," said the man. "In the day time yuh can get a bath at the barbershop, but it's night now."

Harold looked long and earnestly at the hotelkeeper.

"A hotel—and no bath?" he asked. "I have never seen—"

"People come here to sleep—not 'cause they're dirty."

Harold leaned wearily on the desk. "Very well, then," he sighed. "I would like your best suite."

"My best what?"

"Harold," said Speedy, "you jist better take a room."

"I—I believe I shall. I have never been—well, I have always lived in a city. When in Rome, one must do as the Romans do, I suppose."

"Number Six is empty," said the hotelkeeper. "Yuh don't need no key. Go right up. If there ain't no water in the pitcher, yuh can go down the back steps to the pump."

"Yes, I—well, certainly. Thank you."

Harold limped up the steps. Elmer Potts and Buck Lorimer came into the hotel, and Elmer chuckled at sight of Speedy.

"Where-at is the other feller?" asked Elmer.

"Gone upstairs to bed."

Elmer introduced the sheriff, a big, lanky person, with a long, hollow-cheeked face and a murderous mustache. He wanted to know what happened.

"Well, there was two masked men, sheriff," Speedy said. "They got us off the stage and herded us back to a shack in the hills, where another man was waitin' for us. He looked us over and

said we wasn't the ones he wanted."

The sheriff studied Speedy's explanation for a while. "Andy told me where it happened," he said finally. "They herded yuh—how far?"

"Oh, mebbe a mile."

"Yeah? That still leaves yuh nine, ten miles from here. How come yuh made such good time?"

"They let us have their horses."

"They let yuh—huh! They let yuh have—their horses, eh?"

"Oh, yes. They said, 'Sorry to discommode yuh thisaway. You take the horses to town, tie up the reins, and turn 'em loose. They'll come home.'"

SLOWLY the sheriff cuffed his big hat over his left ear and scratched his head. It didn't sound plausible.

"It's got me beat," he said quietly. "Well, I'm glad it wasn't serious. Who is the feller who was with yuh?"

"Harold Ashley Wentworth."

"They didn't want him, either, eh?"

"You ain't ever seen Harold, have yuh?" asked Speedy.

"Not yet."

"When yuh do, yuh'll know blamed well they didn't."

"Well, I'm glad everythin' turned out all right," said the sheriff. "See yuh later."

"Let's go up to the room and set down. It's too hot to sleep," Tombstone said.

Speedy shuddered a little. "Set down?" he asked wearily. "Pardner, you don't know what yuh're askin', but come on."

The room was like an oven. Both windows were open, but there was not a breath of air stirring. Speedy told Tombstone all about the kidnaping, and how they got back to town, not omitting the kick they had at parting.

"They wanted a man named Jones, huh?" queried Tombstone. "Sa-a-ay! Do yuh reckon they meant me?"

"They wanted my pardner—named Jones."

"And they had on masks, eh? Maybe it's a lodge they wanted me to join."

"Yea-a-ah," said Speedy wearily. "The Mystic Knights of What Happened to Jones."

"Adam Jones," added Tombstone soberly.

"Sometime, somewhere," sighed Speedy, "yuh're goin' to claim an uncle and get both of us killed—and I hope this ain't it."

CHAPTER III

Range Thefts

PAINTED FORK was no metropolis, and by the light of day it showed the effects of heat and sand. The main street was narrow, crooked, most of the buildings of the false-front variety. The street was dusty, lined with hitch-racks, and with not a tree in sight. The Mexican Border was only forty miles away, and many of the dwelling houses in the town showed a Mexican influence in architecture.

Elmer Potts joined them at breakfast, and over their ham and eggs, Elmer told them about Painted Fork, and its troubles.

"If yuh're Adam Jones, you'll like to know all this," he said.

Tombstone choked on a piece of ham, nodded, wiped the tears out of his eyes and signaled Elmer to go ahead.

"Yore uncle is dead," said Elmer soberly. "He was shot dead over a week ago. Jack Neil is in jail, charged with the murder. Jack ain't John Adam Jones' nephew, but he's John's cousin's son."

"Pore Uncle John," said Tombstone huskily. It wasn't emotion, it was ham in his wind-pipe.

"Yuh see, nobody exactly cared for John Adam Jones, except mebbe it was Marion Evans," continued Elmer. "Her pa worked for Jones, but got killed a couple years ago by a bad horse. Ol' John wanted her to stay right there at the ranch—which she done. She's as pretty as a red saddle—and she's in love with Johnny Neil."

"In love with the man who killed John Adam Jones?" asked Speedy.

"That's right. Johnny has got a little spread out in the Pintados, where he raises a few cows. Him and Ol' John ain't never been *compadres*. In fact, Ol' John didn't like him a-tall. One day he tells Johnny that he ort to eat some of his own beef so he can find out what it tastes like. That insinuates that Johnny slick-ears his meat. It makes Johnny sore and he says to Ol' John, 'Why, you ol' polecat, if you ever come onto my

spread I'll ventilate yore old hide.'

"And he done jist that," sighed Elmer. "We found Ol' John jist inside the main gate to Johnny's little place, shot to death."

"He thought Johnny was bluffin', huh?" asked Tombstone.

"Well, if he did, he found out better. That left the Bar J without no owner. Sil Kerr and Ike Bradley, bein' awful human, agrees to stay and run the place without salary, until things get fixed up. They've been there over a year. 'Course, Sody White, the cook, is still there. Nobody to pay salaries, nobody to say what's what."

"Well, didn't Jones leave no will?" said Speedy soberly.

"No, he didn't, Speedy. His closest relation is Adam Jones. At least, that's what the lawyer says. Natural-like, if yuh're Adam Jones, you get the Bar J, if the law says so. You are, ain't yuh?"

"I'm holdin' up on the answer, Elmer," said Tombstone soberly. "I'm pretty well fixed, as yuh might say, and I ain't just shore that I want to tie m'self down in a place like this. Don't say nothin', until I make up my mind."

"Yuh see?" asked Speedy, as they went back to the hotel. "Claimin' somethin' might not be so good. Sa-a-ay! That kinda clears up things. Somebody don't want Adam Jones around here. It's a good thing you wasn't on that stage last night."

"Yea-a-ah," breathed Tombstone. "By golly, I'm a marked man. I wonder if anybody around here ever seen Adam Jones. I may have to prove myself a alibi."

"Yuh're goin' to lie both of us into our graves," sighed Speedy.

They found Harold Ashley Wentworth at the hotel. Harold was not happy. He wasn't able to sleep, because of the heat and he was stiff and sore from what had happened to him.

"I am a fool," he told them seriously. "I should never have come down here, and I know I shall never forget last night. Masked men, with guns."

"And boots," added Speedy. "Why did yuh come here, Harold?"

"Some time ago I read a book, dealing with the customs of the West," said Harold. "In it was a paragraph which said that it was very bad form ever to ask a stranger his name, why he came, and in what business was he interested."

"All right," the masked man said to Speedy and Wentworth. "Keep yore hands up and do just what I tell yuh!"

"That's right," declared Tombstone. "You learned quite a lot about the West, I'll betcha. Books will learn yuh a lot of things."

Harold grinned. "Did you say books or boots?"

They went out and sat on the porch, where it was even warmer than inside the hotel. A girl drove up in a buckboard, deftly tied the half-broken pair of broncs to a hitch-rack and went into a store.

"As big as a pint of gin, and as handy as a button on a shirt," remarked Speedy admiringly, and added, "Pretty, too."

CLOSING one eye, Tombstone squinted at the near horse. "Bar J," he said. "Mebbe that's Marion Evans, Speedy."

"Yea-a-ah, that's right. Huh!"

"Thinkin' it over," remarked Tombstone, "I may take over the Bar J after all."

"The Bar J?" queried Harold. "Is that a cattle ranch?"

"Yeah." Tombstone nodded. "It's the property owned by my late lamented uncle, John Adam Jones."

"Is that so? Did he die?"

And so Tombstone proceeded to tell Harold Ashley Wentworth all about the troubles of John Adam Jones and Johnny Neil.

"What is the ranch worth?" asked Harold.

"I ain't made no appraisal yet," replied Tombstone soberly. "It'll prob'ly run into the millions."

"And," mused Harold, "John Adam Jones died intestate."

"I didn't hear about that," said Tombstone. "Mebbe he did."

The hotelkeeper gave Tombstone a letter. Speedy took it and read it carefully. It was from Jim Keaton, secretary of the cattlemen's association. The letter said:

Get in touch with Thomas Grimes, attorney at law, and he will tell you what he wants done.

This letter was sent in a plain envelope. Thomas Grimes had the only gold-lettered sign in Painted Fork. He was also a stock broker, handled insurance and real estate. Grimes was a little, gray-haired person, with some badly-fitted uppers, which caused him to whistle when he talked fast. He took one look at the letter from Jim Keaton, sagged back in his chair and looked them over.

"I asked Jim Keaton for one man," he said.

"We come in sets of two," said Speedy soberly.

"I see. I heard about you two being in town. So you," speaking to Tombstone, "are Adam Jones, nephew of John Adam Jones, eh?"

Tombstone relaxed his long legs and began rolling a cigarette.

"What do you think?" he countered.

"What could I think? Adam Jones has been dead four years."

Tombstone never changed expression. He finished the cigarette and reached for a match.

"Must be the wrong Jones," Speedy said seriously. "On a clear day yuh can hear this one's heart beat."

"What's in a name?" asked Tombstone. "My name is really Jones."

The lawyer smiled slowly. "Suppose we keep on using Adam, too."

"You said Adam was dead."

"Listen," said the lawyer soberly. "If you are working for Jim Keaton, you can't be as dumb as you act. You've heard about the murder of John Adam Jones, I suppose. You know that Johnny Neil is in jail, charged with that murder. Perhaps you know that John Adam Jones left no will. I was his lawyer—and he wouldn't write a will. In fact he wouldn't do anything anyone wanted him to do.

"I do know that John had a nephew named Adam. Outside of Adam, the only living relative he had is Johnny Neil, the son of a cousin of John. Johnny is a fine boy, even if they do say he murdered his uncle. As I told you, Adam Jones is dead. John knew it. I said to him:

" 'You know that Johnny Neil is your only living relative, so why don't you will him the Bar J?' He said, 'Because I don't like that wild-eyed, young devil—and it's none of your business.' After John was killed, Cort Haden, owner of the Lazy H, comes out with a note for fifteen thousand against the Bar J. Borrowed money, Cort says.

"If they hang Johnny Neil, Cort Haden will probably get the whole Bar J for the fifteen thousand dollars, and I don't believe Johnny has a ghost of a chance with a Pintado Valley jury. That's the story, boys."

Tombstone Jones blew a smoke-ring, shoved a bony forefinger through it and looked up at the lawyer.

"What's our job?" he asked.

"As Adam Jones, I believe I can get you installed at the Bar J, where you can protect your interests—the interests of Adam Jones. At least, we can block Cort Haden's move to have the court give him charge of the ranch, in order to protect his note."

"You don't like Haden," said Speedy soberly. "I can see that."

"I do not," replied Grimes firmly. "I don't want him out there. I don't believe Johnny Neil killed John Jones, but nobody else seems interested in whether he did or didn't. Buck Lorimer is satisfied that he did, so he won't do anything to prove otherwise."

"About that girl out there?" queried Tombstone.

GRIMES' expression grew thoughtful. He nodded.

"Marion Evans," said the lawyer quietly. "I saw her grow up from a baby. I knew her mother and father. Maybe I'm just a bit sentimental over that girl. She's only eighteen, and she hasn't any other home. As a matter of fact, I don't want Cort Haden and his gang out there. If we can tie this thing up long enough—maybe we can prove something in Johnny's favor."

"We ain't worked on nothin' much, except rustlin' deals," said Speedy. "I dunno how much good we'd be at this kind of stuff."

"Didn't Jim Keaton tell you anything, except that letter?"

"No, he didn't."

"That is why he sent you down here," said Grimes. "The Bar J has been stolen blind. I'm not sure there is enough cows left to cover that Haden note. John Adam Jones was an old man, too old to do much of his own work. He didn't ride much any more. I don't mind telling you boys that folks didn't like John Adam Jones."

"But they'd hang Johnny Neil for killin' him?" said Tombstone.

"They would," declared the lawyer, "and they surely will, if we can't do something about it. You go out to the ranch and take over. There are only three men out there, Kerr and Bradley, two very good cowboys, and Sody White, the cook. Kerr and Bradley have been there only a year or more, but White has been there for years. I'll fix this up with the judge, and then go out with you. Just remember that you are Adam Jones."

"Why didn't Sheriff Lorimer stop the rustlin'?" asked Speedy.

"Buck Lorimer," said Briggs soberly, "couldn't stop a grandfather's clock, if he had hold of the pendulum with both hands."

"Here's another thing," said Tombstone. "Mebbe you heard about the stage bein' held up, and the kidnapin' of Speedy and this here Harold Ashley Wentworth."

"Why, yes, I heard something about it, but not in detail."

"They thought they was gettin' Adam Jones," said Speedy.

Thomas Grimes rubbed his chin, his eyes speculative. "They thought one of you was Adam Jones. Hm-m-m-m! That is rather odd. How would they even guess a thing like that?"

"In Silver Butte," said Speedy, "Tombstone told Andy Bowers that he was Adam Jones—and Andy advertised him plenty."

"I see-e-e. Hm-m-m-m. Somebody didn't want Adam Jones to come down here. Well, well! Are you frightened over it, Tombstone?"

"I've done shook so much that every tooth in my head is loose."

"I see." The lawyer smiled. "I wondered what it was that was rattling."

"That," said Speedy soberly, "was my knees."

CHAPTER IV

Two Warnings

IN THE afternoon they went out to the Bar J, all three of them riding in Thomas Grimes' buggy. Grimes introduced them to Marion Evans, and told her that Adam Jones was taking charge of the ranch, until all legal matters were straightened out. Sody White, the old cook, shook hands gravely, and without any comments. Sil Kerr and Ike Brad-

ley merely nodded. Kerr was a big, square-jawed cowpuncher, while Ike Bradley was a half-pint, with a crooked nose and buck-teeth.

The two cowboys went back to their work at the corral, Sody went back to the kitchen, and the lawyer headed for Painted Fork. Marion took Tombstone and Speedy to the room formerly occupied by John Adam Jones, and they dumped their war-bags. There was a framed, crayon picture of John Jones on the wall. It was a life-sized head, made from a photograph, in which John was staring squarely at the lenses. Tombstone looked it over from every angle, shuddered a little and took it off the wall.

"I don't mind lyin' about bein' his nephew but I don't want that old *pelicano* glarin' at me all the time," said Tombstone. "He ain't taken his eyes off me since I came in here."

"Well, he ain't purty to look at," said Speedy. "Mebbe it'll be a relief to him, too. Yuh can't tell."

They went out on the porch, where Marion was sewing. She did not look up.

"I suppose you will want me to move out," she said.

"Why?" asked Speedy.

"Well, after all, if this ranch belongs to Mr. Jones."

"That," said Tombstone quickly, "ain't been settled, ma'am."

The girl smiled slowly. "It is funny to be called ma'am," she said. "Everyone calls me Marion."

"That's a awful pretty name," said Tombstone. "One time I had a pinto horse and I—"

"We ain't talkin' about horses," interrupted Speedy.

"Was the pinto named Marion?" asked the girl.

Tombstone grinned. "'Course not. It was a he horse."

The girl laughed, and they all felt more at ease.

"Marion, what sort of a hair-pin is this Grimes person?" Speedy said.

"He's fine," she declared. "Just fine. I've known him all my life."

"He was John Jones' lawyer, eh?"

"Yes, he was, Speedy. Mr. Jones was mighty fine to me, except—well, he didn't like Johnny Neil. You don't know Johnny, of course."

"No, ma'am—Marion," said Tombstone. "We never met him—yet."

"They say he killed his uncle," she said quietly. "I know he didn't. Mr. Grimes don't think he did. But I guess that everybody else thinks he did. Do you think he did?"

"We're awful new here," said Speedy. "'Course, if you say he didn't, we'll back yuh."

"I'm glad," she said, but without any enthusiasm.

"Bein' glad kind of helps out," said Tombstone. "What do Bradley and Kerr think about it, Marion?"

"They don't say much. Of course, they are very loyal to Mr. Jones. In fact, they offered to work here for nothing until this is settled by the court."

"Sody" White came out on the porch, wearing a new flour-sack apron. Marion went into the house so Sody sat down. He was an old rawhider who had ridden the ranges until his rheumatism grew up.

"So yuh're Adam Jones, eh?" he said. "You favor the Jones fambly."

"In what way?" asked Speedy.

"Two arms and two laigs," replied Sody soberly.

"Most of us are born thataway," said Tombstone. "Sody," he said soberly, "if I'm goin' to have this here Bar J wished upon me, I'd like to get yore version of this rustlin' we're sufferin' from."

"Sufferin' is right," nodded Sody, as he filled his pipe. "We're bein' robbed—plenty. Oh, not big bunches, but a regular dreen. We ain't had a chunk of veal since Settin' Bull stood up."

"Young stuff all gone, eh?"

"Uh-huh. John was gettin' too old to ride much. Eyesight wasn't as good as it used to be. Left it to the boys. I'll say they've worked hard tryin' to trap them rustlers, but it ain't no use. The sheriff done what he could, but yuh can't do much, 'less'n you've got a idea to work on."

"It's a awful chore." Tombstone nodded. "What about this fifteen thousand dollars he owed Cort Haden of the Lazy H?"

SODY shook his head sadly. "I dunno anythin' about that," he said. "They traded in draw-poker, mostly. John prided his fool self on his poker-playin' ability. Sometimes he'd go over to the Lazy H, and him and Cort Haden would play two-handed draw, sky-limit and no holds barred. Four, five months ago

John said to me, 'Sody, one of these nights, I'm comin' home with the Lazy H in my pocket.' But he didn't—and after that he didn't go over there no more. Mebbe Cort took him for the fifteen thousand dollars—I dunno."

"Sounds plausible," nodded Tombstone. "Roulette is my game."

"It ort to be," said Speedy dryly. "You've paid for it."

Tombstone and Speedy ate with Sil Kerr and Ike Bradley. The two cowboys talked very little, and after supper they went to town. Tombstone said to Speedy:

"I'm just scared that the boys resent us."

They were in the main room, talking with Marion, when a horse and buggy drew up at the front of the house. It was Harold Ashley Wentworth and Deputy Sheriff Elmer Potts.

"Harold has got hisself a scare; so he hired me to bring him out here," Elmer explained.

"What scared yuh, Harold?" asked Tombstone curiously.

Harold didn't say—he just handed Tombstone a piece of soiled paper, which Tombstone handed to Speedy. On it was pencilled in large, crudely-drawn letters:

IF YOU WANT TO LIVE—
HIT THE GRIT.
SNOOPERS AIN'T WELCOME HERE.

Speedy read it aloud.

"I am not a snooper," Harold said. Harold's glasses were askew and his hair touseled. He looked at Marion, forgot his fears long enough to smile.

"Harold, I'd like to have yuh meet Marion," Speedy said.

"This is indeed a pleasure, Miss Marion," said Harold. "I hope you will excuse my appearance but I am a bit upset."

"Where-at did yuh get this billy-doo, Harold?" asked Tombstone.

"It was in an envelope, left at the hotel. No one knows who left it. I—I am sure I haven't snooped."

The deputy sheriff eyed Harold for several moments. "Why would anybody threaten him?" he said wonderingly.

"And how on earth does one hit the grit?" asked Harold.

"*Vamoso pronto,*" said Tombstone, gesturing vaguely. "Rattle yore hocks, spurn the brush, light a shuck, et cettery."

"He means pull out fast," explained Elmer.

"Go hither from hence." Speedy grinned. "In plain English, Harold, they're orderin' yuh out of the country—fast."

"But, my goodness, I don't want to go away, Speedy. What would you do if someone sent you a note like that?"

"Have you," propounded Speedy soberly, "ever seen a scared Smith?"

Harold grinned slowly and shook his head. "I never have," he said.

"And what's more, yuh won't, Harold."

"Do you mean that a Smith never gets frightened?"

"No, I don't mean that at all. You never see a scared Smith, 'cause they'd be goin' so fast yuh can't see 'em. Just a blur, that's all."

Harold started to grin, swallowed painfully. "I really do not know which way to run," he said.

"Won't you sit down?" asked Marion. "I'm sure you are safe here."

"Thank you very much—my legs are

[*Turn page*]

TOPS FOR QUALITY

BIGGER AND BETTER

a little weak. You see, I asked Mr. Potts to bring me out here, because I seemed to feel that I—well, I felt it might be a safer place than town."

"Well, I'll be headin' back to town," said Elmer. "You'll be all right here, Harold—I hope. I'll tell Johnny I saw yuh, Marion."

"Thank you, Elmer. Come out when you can."

After Elmer left Harold said:

"I'm sorry, Miss Marion. I—I don't want to be a bother. Perhaps I should go back to town."

"It is no bother," she said. "I'll merely fix another bed. You can't go back there, because you never know what might happen."

Marion went to prepare the extra bed, and Harold said:

"Isn't she wonderful?"

There was an extra bed in the room assigned to Tombstone and Speedy, and Marion brought the bedding. The door was open. Harold went over to the doorway and watched her make the bed. She saw the picture of John Adam Jones, leaning against the wall, and she noticed the discolored spot on the wall where it had hung for so long.

Tombstone walked over to the doorway beside Harold, and saw her hang the picture again.

"Is that the portrait of John Adam Jones, Miss Marion?" Harold said.

"Yes," she said. "Not such a good likeness though."

"Don'tcha think so?" queried Tombstone. "Why, I think it's—"

Crash! Splintered glass flew all over the main room, and a bullet tugged at the lobe of Harold's left ear.

BEFORE any one could move, another bullet cut splinters off the door casing. Then Speedy hit the lamp with a chair-cushion, and the place was plunged in darkness, except for what light came from the bedroom, where the lamp was out of line with the doorway.

Tombstone had kicked Harold's feet from under him, and went crawling toward the smashed front window, trying to locate the shooters. Marion had dropped down behind the bed. Sody was in the doorway to the kitchen.

"Anybody killed?" he yelled. "What happened? Can'tcha talk?"

Tombstone had discovered that each window was equipped with a shade, and was crawling around, yanking them down.

"We ain't got a lick of sense," he complained. "Settin' here with the winders uncovered after bein' warned. Ain't a brain among us."

"I'll fetch another lamp," offered Sody. "Got one right here."

Harold was rather white, as he leaned against the wall and fingered the lobe of his left ear. That forty-five bullet had given it a very decided flip. Marion was a bit white, too. Tombstone looked into the bedroom, and turned around, after a quick inspection.

"Uncle John Adam Jones is down," he said quietly. "Hit twice."

The two bullets had ruined the crayon-made features of the former owner of the Bar J, but the piercing eyes still looked fiercely straight ahead.

"Wh-why would anybody sh-shoot his picture?" Harold said huskily.

Tombstone and Speedy looked at each other. Perhaps it was rather amazing to find a man that dumb.

"Prob'ly somebody who don't know the old man is dead," Speedy said.

"They almost shot my ear off," said Harold soberly. "You see, I—I have never been that close to death before in my life."

"Why don't some of yuh go out and salivate them drygulchers?" asked Sody peevishly. "All yuh do is talk about it."

"Do yuh reckon they're waitin' for us, Sody?" asked Tombstone.

"Well, no, I don't reckon so. Huh! Who was they shootin' at—you or the dude?"

"Heavens!" gasped Harold. "You don't mean they deliberately shot at me?"

"They told yuh to hit the grit, didn't they?" asked Speedy.

"Why, yes, but—well, don't you think they are rather impetuous?"

Tombstone grinned. "Yeah, I reckon so. Marion, are you scared?"

Marion nodded, her lips tight.

"I should have stayed in town," Harold said miserably.

"You are staying right here, young man," she said firmly. "Just remember that lightning doesn't strike twice in the same place."

Harold Ashley Wentworth felt of his left ear. "I hope not," he said earnestly.

"We'll keep that picture down so's they won't have any inducement," Tombstone said.

CHAPTER V

Missing Cowhand

NEXT morning Harold admitted that he slept very little, but was cheerful about it.

"Aw, yuh'll git used to it," Sody said. "Out here we feel that we ain't pop'lar 'less'n somebody takes a shot at us once in a while."

"Don't they ever kill anybody?" asked Harold.

"Oh, about the second try, they get yuh. Don't allus kill yuh, of course."

Harold shuddered but ate all of his breakfast.

"Adam, how come they nicknamed yuh Tombstone?" Sody said.

"Well, I'll tell yuh," drawled Tombstone. "I've allus made it a point to buy a suitable tombstone for every man I killed. I'd hate to have one of my victims in a unmarked grave."

"How horrible!" exclaimed Harold.

"I think it's quaint," said Sody.

"Yea-a-ah," said Tombstone. "It's cost me a lot of money. One time I got me into a real bad scrap, and I had to buy six at once."

"Do you mean to say that you killed six men at one time?" asked Harold.

"Not all at once, Harold—I had to empty my six-gun. I'm shore glad I wasn't a two-gun man. Twelve tombstones shore run into money."

Cort Haden, owner of the Lazy H, and one of his cowpunchers, rode out that morning. Haden was a rather tall, good looking cowman, reputed fast with a gun. When Haden and his cowboy arrived, Tombstone was down at the stable. Tombstone leaned lazily against the doorway of the stable and watched Haden dismount near him.

"Yuh're Jones, eh?" queried Haden. Tombstone nodded.

"I'm Cort Haden, owner of the Lazy H."

"Oh, yeah," said Tombstone indifferently, and waited for Haden to continue the conversation.

"So yuh're Old John's nephew, eh?"

"That seems to be the idea, Mr. Haden."

"And you're claimin' ownership of the Bar J, are yuh?"

"Somethin' like that."

"All right. Do you happen to know that the Bar J owes me fifteen thousand dollars?"

"Yeah, I heard about it."

"When," asked Cort Haden," do I get my money?"

"Did yuh come over 'specially to get it this mornin'?"

"I'd take it now—shore."

Tombstone grinned slowly. "I don't pack that much on me, Mr. Haden. As a matter of fact, them things has all got to be proved in court. Lookin' the situation square in the eye, you may be a long time in gettin' it."

"Don't worry, I'll collect it all right."

"I ain't worryin', Mr. Haden. When is that note due?"

"It has been due for months."

"Why didn't John Jones pay yuh?"

"He said he didn't have the money."

Tombstone yawned. "I don't guess he was lyin', Mr. Haden."

"Well," said the owner of the Lazy H, "I just wanted yuh to know that when yuh get through payin' me what the Bar J owes me, yuh won't have much left."

"The outlook is gloomy—for both of us," said Tombstone.

Marion and Harold came out on the big porch.

Cort Haden looked up that way, turned to Tombstone.

"That's that Wentworth dude, ain't it?" he said.

"Yeah, his name's Wentworth. Somebody wrote him a warnin', tellin' him to get out of Pintado Valley, so he came out here last night."

"This is part of Pintado Valley, Jones."

"Yeah. He found that out. Some sidewinder shot twice through a window last evenin', and almost got him."

Cort Haden looked closely at Tombstone. "Who would shoot that dude?" he asked.

"I wish I could answer that," replied Tombstone. "I'd give yuh the answer and his scalp at the same time. Yuh see, he didn't miss me very far."

"Yeah? Huh! Who is this Wentworth, Jones? What's he doin' here?"

Tombstone grinned. "Well, I dunno who he is nor what he is, but somebody around this country is worryin' a lot about him."

"It sounds like they are," agreed Haden. "Well, we've got to be driftin'. Glad to have met yuh, Jones. I wanted to let yuh know how we stand."

"Nice of yuh, I'm shore," said Tombstone soberly. "Drop in again."

SIL KERR and Ike Bradley came down from the bunkhouse and hunkered down in the shade with Tombstone.

"We had a talk with Grimes last night, and he said that you are in charge out here, and we take yore orders," Bradley said.

"And," added Kerr, "we want yuh to understand that we offered to work for nothin' until this deal is all straightened out."

"That's nice of yuh." Tombstone nodded. "In a few days we'll start makin' a count. Yuh see, we've got to know what the Bar J owns. I've been told that this outfit has been robbed so badly that nothin' much is left. What's yore ideas, boys?"

"That's right," agreed Bradley. "Everybody knows it. Nobody knows how it's done. The sheriff can't figure it out, and it's a cinch we can't. We've done our best."

"Well, that's all anybody can do, I reckon. I'll look into it myself, soon's I get time."

"That's good," said Bradley quietly. "What's the dude doin' here?"

"You ask him," suggested Tombstone. "I did—and he told me it wasn't any of my business."

"Somebody in town suggested that he might be from the cattle association," said Bradley.

"Yuh mean—a cow detective? Aw, shucks, they ain't that hard up, are they? That feller's too dumb to be a detective."

"Mebbe he's in disguise," suggested Kerr.

"If he is, he's shore a wonder," Tombstone said. "He's fooled me, I'll tell yuh that."

"Are you hard to fool?" asked Bradley.

"I reckon I must be. I ain't never been fooled yet."

Kerr and Bradley rode away, intending to move some cattle from an almost-dry water hole. Tombstone went back to the house, where Marion and Harold were talking.

"Do the boys seem satisfied with their new boss?" Marion said.

Tombstone grinned slowly. "Well, they didn't say. I reckon they know more about what's to be done than I do, and they told me they were workin' for nothin'."

"That is true," said Marion. "They are very loyal to the Bar J."

"One must be loyal to do that," said Harold.

"We had another cowboy for a while," said Marion. "Mr. Jones liked him very much. His name was Dave Morris. But he quit his job, and went back to Colorado. I never knew he'd quit, until after Mr. Jones was killed. Ike Bradley said he'd gone back to Colorado."

Sody came out on the porch to smoke his pipe.

"I heard yuh talkin' about Dave Morris," he said. "Nice feller. Praised my biscuits and he praised my beans. Yuh know," Sody stared thoughtfully at the bowl of his old pipe, "the mornin' of the day John Jones was killed, he saddled a horse. John didn't ride much any more. I said to him, 'If yuh're goin' to town, I'll drive yuh in,' and he said, 'I'm goin' to meet Dave Morris, and I can't use a buggy.'

"I don't know where he met Dave Morris. I told it to Bradley and he said, 'Why, Dave quit the night before the old man was shot. He was goin' back to Colorado. Mebbe the old man met him in Painted Fork to pay him off.' I didn't say nothin', but I don't think Bradley was right."

"That's interestin'," said Tombstone. "Mebbe Morris shot the old man."

"I've thought that over, too, but it don't make sense. Him and Dave was too friendly. And why on earth would he kill John Jones? No, it ain't reasonable. But it kind of stuck in my craw—him sayin' that he was goin' to meet Dave Morris. I don't guess we'll ever know."

"Did yuh tell the sheriff?" asked Tombstone.

"Yeah, I told him but he didn't make nothin' of it. I told Grimes, the lawyer, but he said we couldn't do anythin' unless we could find Dave Morris."

"I wish we could find him," said Marion, "It—it might help Johnny."

Tombstone wandered back to the stable, and Harold joined him.

"That girl is wonderful," declared Harold. "She told me all about her romance with Johnny Neil. I feel terribly sorry for her. Why, she hasn't any

money, no relatives, no home. She and Johnny were to have been married soon. They had planned their own home, and now it has all been ruined. Do you think they will hang Johnny?"

"Folks around here think they will, Harold."

"But, Tombstone, can't we get him out of jail?"

TOMBSTONE stared at Harold. "Yuh mean bust him out?"

"Could it be done?" asked Harold.

"I'm scared not, pardner. Don'tcha realize that Johnny would have to take to the tall hills and dodge the law all his life?"

"I suppose he would. No, that wouldn't work out. But couldn't he get off with a fine?"

"They don't have no cash fine for a murder, Harold. Anyway, if there was, it'd be awful big and Johnny ain't got a cent."

"I have," said Harold simply.

"You have? Pardner, would you pay his fine?"

"Why not?" asked Harold.

Tombstone cuffed his big hat down over one eye and blinked at Harold.

"Yuh got me there, pardner," he said quietly.

Speedy came down and joined them.

"I'm ridin' to town, Speedy," Tombstone said. "You look after the place."

"What's supposed to be on yore mind?" asked Speedy.

Tombstone didn't say. He selected a tall roan gelding, picked out the best available saddle, and rode away from the ranch. He was still thinking about Dave Morris, when he drew up at the sheriff's office. Buck Lorimer and Elmer Potts were there, talking with Doctor Ray, the coroner, Elmer introduced Tombstone to the doctor.

"Well, well!" the doctor said. "So you are Adam Jones, John's nephew. I must say, there is little resemblance."

"Jones' do come in assorted sizes, shapes and colors," admitted Tombstone. "I'm one of the long, handsome ones. I'm glad to meet yuh, Doc. Yuh know, there's somethin' I wanted to ask yuh. Was this here uncle of mine killed with a six-gun, shotgun or a rifle?"

"He was killed with a forty-five revolver."

"Uh-huh. Killed instantly, Doc?"

"No, I wouldn't say he was, Jones. As a matter of fact, he was shot through the back, and possibly lived on hour. I—I don't believe the question ever came up at the inquest, or did it, Buck?"

"No, I don't reckon it did," replied the sheriff. Tombstone smiled.

"What's on yore mind, Tombstone?" asked Elmer.

"Just this," replied Tombstone. "You fellers took it for granted that Johnny Neil shot him, because you found the body at his place. Yuh never thought that mebbe the old man rode a long ways before he pitched off his horse."

Buck scowled thoughtfully. "Be hard to prove," he said slowly.

"No harder than provin' he didn't. What do you say, Doc?"

"Well," replied the doctor, "it is a possibility. There is only one stumbling-block to that theory, Jones—Pintado Valley has made up its mind that Johnny is guilty. If Johnny Neil didn't shoot John Jones, who did?"

"You men knew a feller named Dave Morris, didn't yuh?"

They stared at him. Finally the sheriff said:

"What about Dave Morris?"

"The day John Adam Jones was killed, he rode away from the Bar J to meet Dave Morris, and it wasn't in Painted Fork, because when Sody White offered to take John to town in a buggy, John said he couldn't take a buggy where he was meetin' Dave Morris."

"Where did you get all that, Tombstone?"

"From Sody White, the cook at the Bar J."

"Well, that's funny! He never told us."

"Yuh never asked him, did yuh?"

"No, I never. I couldn't go around, askin' everybody."

"I ain't particular," said Tombstone soberly.

"But what became of Dave Morris?" asked the sheriff.

"I heard he went back to Colorado," said Elmer. "Somebody told me but I dunno who it was."

"I heard that, too," said Tombstone. "But Dave Morris was in the valley the day John Jones was mudered, and John went to meet him."

No one had any comments.

"How's the dude, Tombstone?" Elmer said.

"Fine. A short time after you left last

night, somebody shot twice through a front window at the ranch, and almost got him. Nicked his left ear, and put two bullets into a pitcher of John Adam Jones."

"Are you jokin'?" asked the sheriff.

"No, and they wasn't either, Sheriff."

"I told yuh he got a warnin'," reminded the sheriff slowly.

"I'd kind of like to meet Johnny Neil," said Tombstone. "Yuh see, I ain't never seen him yet."

"Take him back to the cell, Elmer," said the sheriff. "Better watch and see that he don't give Johnny a saw or some dynamite."

CHAPTER VI

Grim Secret

JOHNNY NEIL was a nice-looking young cowboy, but being confined wasn't doing him any good. He shook hands through the bars with Tombstone.

"Elmer told me about you taking over the ranch," he said. "How is Marion?"

"She's finer'n frawg-hair. Johnny, did you know Dave Morris?"

"Why, sure, I knew Dave. What about him?"

"When was the last time you saw him?"

Johnny scowled thoughtfully. "The last time? Why, it was the day—the day John Jones was killed. Dave rode in at my place alone. I was saddlin' up to go back into the hills, and he didn't stay but a few minutes. Said he had to be goin', too."

"Did he say he'd quit the Bar J?"

Johnny shook his head. "No, he didn't say anythin' like that. Dave was a nice feller. He used to stop at my place and have supper with me. He was only with the Bar J a few months. Just between me and you, I always did think that Dave spent quite a lot of his time tryin' to find out who was rustlin' Bar J cows. If he'd quit the Bar J, I'm sure he'd have told me. And he was ridin' a Bar J horse."

"Well, thank yuh, Johnny," said Tombstone. "See yuh later. I'll tell Marion I saw yuh, and you was lookin' fine."

Elmer and Tombstone walked back to the office. The doctor was gone.

"Tombstone, you've kind of made me wonder about certain things," Buck Lorimer, the sheriff said.

Elmer told the sheriff what Johnny Neil had said about Morris being at his ranch the day of the murder.

"Why don't things like that come out?" Sheriff Lorimer asked peevishly. "He never told me that."

"Yuh didn't ask him, did yuh?" queried Elmer soberly.

"Listen, you wall-eyed—no, I don't reckon I did, Elmer. It seems to me that there's a lot of questions I didn't ask."

"Well," said Tombstone soberly, "I wouldn't advise yuh to ask too many now, Buck. Yuh might find out a lot of things, and yuh might get loaded with forty-five bullets, too. I'll go back to the Bar J and see if I can find any more answers."

"I'd love to hear 'em," said the sheriff.

As Tombstone stepped out on the sidewalk, a man was running down towards the office. Elmer came into the doorway and looked up the street toward the running man.

"What's wrong now?" he asked sharply.

The man was panting heavily, all out of breath. He managed to say:

"It's Grimes, the lawyer—beat up!" He paused to get another breath. "Mrs. Allen, who takes care of his house, found him. Somebody beat him bad. Maybe he's dead. Get the doctor, will yuh?"

Tombstone went with them. Grimes lived in a modest, little cottage about two blocks off the main street. He lived alone, took his meals at a restaurant, and a Mrs. Allen came at any time during the day to keep his house in order. The lawyer was unconscious from a beating on his head. The dried blood indicated that it had been done hours ago. Doctor Ray went right to work on him, but refused to say how badly he was hurt, except to mutter, "Bad enough."

"Looks like the barrel end of a six-gun," said the sheriff. "He shore got a pistol-whippin'. Do yuh reckon he'll be abe to talk, Doc?"

"Lucky if he's able to live."

Tombstone came back past the hotel, where a group of men were talking about Grimes, and the hotelkeeper called to

him. He went into the hotel and got an unstamped letter, which he handed to the tall cowboy. On the envelope was penciled Tombstone's name.

"One of the boys found it on the floor," explained the man.

Tombstone thanked him and went on to the Bar J. He couldn't read it but he knew that it was not from a friend. Speedy met him at the stable. Tombstone told him about Grimes, and gave him the letter. It was crudely penciled in capital letters and read:

WE NO WHO YUH ARE AND YOU AINT GOT NO RITE AT THE BAR J. GIT OUT OF HERE AT ONCE OR YOU WON'T NEVER LEEVE. WE MEEN BISINES. GIT OUT OR DIE.

It was unsigned. Speedy scowled thoughtfully.

"Yuh know what?" he asked quietly. "They beat the truth out of Grimes. They made him talk. We're up against a blind canyon, Tombstone."

"Does look kind of tough," admitted Tombstone. "They shore petted pore Grimes on the head. Doc don't know if he'll live or not."

"What are we goin' to do?" asked Speedy.

"I don't know, pardner. Oh-oh! Here comes Elmer Potts. Mebbe he's got somethin' to talk about."

THE deputy dismounted quickly and came over to them.

"Grimes was conscious for a few moments, and he said: 'Tell Tombstone Jones to look out—they'll kill him.'" Potts said. "That's all he said."

Elmer sat down and reached for the makings of a cigarette.

"That kind of news shore goose-pimples me," said Speedy. Tombstone handed Elmer the note he got at the hotel.

"Well, great, lovely dove!" snorted Elmer, as he read it. "That sort of makes it unanimous, don't it?"

"Elmer, yuh're lookin' at a awful sick man," said Tombstone soberly.

"Well, you ain't goin' to stay right here and be killed, are yuh?"

"I'm too sick to be moved."

"Uh-huh. Well, I was hopin' you'd run."

"Yuh was, Elmer? Why?"

"Well, yuh see," Elmer took a deep breath and lighted his cigarette, "yuh see, Tombstone, Buck Lorimer said, 'You stay with 'em out there, until that fool Jones pulls out, or the shootin' is over. Things like this are our business.' But you'll notice that he didn't come out to help protect yuh."

"I never thought I'd live to have a bodyguard," said Tombstone.

"Disinterested folks would call him a keeper," said Speedy.

"Well," said Elmer, "if yuh ain't pullin' out, what are yuh goin' to do, Tombstone? Set here and get shot?"

"Yuh're awful blunt in yore remarks, Elmer. C'mon, Speedy. We're saddlin' up. The three of us are goin' to take a ride."

"What for?" asked Elmer curiously.

"Well, Elmer, I'll tell yuh," said Tombstone soberly. "Me and Speedy ain't never seen much of Pintado Valley, and I'd hate to think I got killed in a strange place."

"Is he crazy, Speedy?" asked Elmer. Speedy looked thoughtfully at Tombstone, who was going into the stable, and replied:

"Elmer, we ain't heard from all the precincts yet, but on incomplete reports, he's shore runnin' ahead."

Johnny Neil's ranchhouse was small, unpretentious. They stopped there and Elmer showed them where they found the body of John Adam Jones. Then they rode on into the hills, where they could look over the valley. There was a scattering of cattle in the hills, all the brands of the valley in evidence, the Bar J, Lazy H, Circle S and the Rafter A.

"Yuh can't alter the Bar J into any of the others," Tombstone said. "So they ain't alterin' brands, that's a cinch. And also, if you'll look close, you'll see that no two of 'em's branded on the same spot. The Bar J brands on the left hip, the Lazy H on the right side, the Circle S on the left side and the Rafter A on the right hip."

"We figured that out quite a while ago," said Elmer.

"Yuh did, Elmer?" queried Tombstone. "That took brains."

"Oh, it took us quite a while, but we got it."

"Oh, shore, yuh can't do it all to once."

They swung further back into the broken hills and were working their way down along the rim of a big washout, when Tombstone drew up, his head lifted. Somewhere, and close, a cow was

bawling weakly.

"Prob'ly fell into the washout and can't get out," said Elmer.

They worked their way along, until the sound came from almost below them. Here was a deep pot-hole, probably washed out by a big cloudburst years ago. Tombstone crawled through the brush where he could look down there. Then he went back to the others and they circled one end of it, coming out into an open space, where there was no brush at the rim.

Down in the pot-hole was a big, spotted cow, looking up at them. On the ground, half concealed in weeds and low brush, was the body of a spotted calf. Apparently the calf was dead.

"I'll betcha her calf fell in, and she went down after it," Speedy said. "You can see where she slid down there, but the bank is too soft for her to get back. She'll starve down there."

"She's more'n half starved right now," said Tombstone.

He took two ropes and knotted them together, shook out the loop and hunkered down on the rim of the pot-hole. Tombstone was an expert with a lariat, but this was a very difficult feat. His first cast landed on the rump of the starving cow, but she paid little attention. Time after time he flung that loop, but caught nothing.

His last cast hit the cow on the neck, and she lowered her head. At the same moment the loop twisted, turned over and Tombstone almost fell over backwards, taking up the slack. The loop was tight around her horns. The cow merely shook her head wearily.

"All right," grinned Tombstone. "Elmer, you get yore horse, and we'll haul her out—maybe. Speedy, you get that other rope and we'll let you slide down to her. Perhaps you can twist her tail enough to git her to help a little."

"You keep that rope tight," warned Speedy. "I never trust a cow."

ELMER helped Speedy go down on the rope, and then took a dally around his saddle horn with the other rope.

"She's a Bar J, and I don't like the look in her eye," Speedy called. "The calf is dead. Whew! She's been dead quite a while, too."

Elmer swung his horse around, so they could take the cow up the best slope. She tried to hook Speedy, but the rope prevented her. He grabbed her tail and yelled to Elmer:

"Full speed ahead!"

Tombstone helped with the pulling, and they snaked that poor cow up over the bank, cow bawling, dust flying. She didn't try to get up. Elmer slacked the rope and Tombstone took it off her horns. Then she rolled over and slowly got to her feet. They watched her shake her head a few times, taking out the kinks, and then she went down the hill, walking slowly. Speedy was yelling at them to throw him that rope, so they went back to the rim. Speedy was partway back, trying to get a foot-hold.

"What's yore hurry?" Tombstone yelled down at him.

Speedy's foot slipped and he slid back, clawing at the dirt.

"Git me out of here!" he yelled. "There's a dead man down here!"

"Are you sure?" asked Elmer. Speedy looked up at him, an agonized expression showing through the dust.

"I—I stepped on him!" yelled Speedy. "Gimme that rope!"

Tombstone tied off the double rope to an old snag, and he and Elmer went down into the pot-hole. The man was dead all right, almost buried in the low brush and weeds. He had been dead quite a while, too. Elmer took a good look at him, opened and closed his own mouth several times.

"Th-that's Dud-Dave Morris!" he finally blurted. "What's left of him!"

"Shot right through the head, too," said Tombstone, examining the skull.

"What next?" asked Elmer helplessly. "I'm gettin' goosepimples."

Tombstone turned the dead calf over. On its right side was the newly-burned brand of the Lazy H. The three men looked at it and at each other. The calf's mother, marked almost exactly like the calf, bore the old mark of the Bar J.

"That calf was shot," said Tombstone, pointing at the bullet hole in its head.

"Let's get out of here and find the sheriff!" exclaimed Elmer.

With the aid of the rope they were able to get back to the rim. Elmer was all excited.

"We've got the deadwood on Cort Haden and his bunch!" he exclaimed. "They're stealin' Bar J calves."

"Wait a minute," said Tombstone. "We can't prove it. Mebbe we can't find

the old cow. That calf don't prove anythin', Elmer. We've got a dead man, and it's more important to find out who shot him."

"Yuh mean—don't say nothin' about the cow and calf?"

"I reckon that'd be the best thing to do. It don't allus do to tell everythin' yuh know. Tell Buck Lorimer that we seen buzzards over there and investigated."

CHAPTER VII

Scent of Perfume

COILING their ropes, they climbed into the saddle and headed for Painted Fork. Ike Bradley and Sil Kerr were riding into Painted Fork as the three men came in. Tombstone reined over to meet them at a hitching post, and told them about finding the body of Morris.

They were both surprised and indignant, questioning Tombstone closely as to where the body was found. Tombstone said quietly:

"You boys range-brand all the Bar J calves, don't yuh?"

"We sure do," replied Bradley.

"Not all of 'em," said Tombstone. "Somebody else is helpin' yuh. We found a sample today. Don't say a word about it. We'll lay a trap and get the whole bunch."

"Ain't yuh tellin' the sheriff?" asked Kerr anxiously.

"Nope. I'll handle this deal."

It didn't require much time for the sheriff to get the coroner, an extra horse for packing the body back, and plenty equipment to get into and out of the pothole. Tombstone and Speedy went with them, and it was dark before they got back to Painted Fork. Buck Lorimer saw the dead calf, but paid no attention to it. In fact, he didn't even note that the little animal had been shot.

Even Elmer noticed this. On the way back he smiled at Tombstone.

"If yuh want Buck to discover somethin', write it out and mail it to him," Elmer said.

They ate supper in Painted Fork that evening, sitting with their backs against a wall, and where they could face the door and windows. Everyone was talking about the murder of Dave Morris, but no one, except the three men who made the discovery, knew about the misbranded calf.

Thomas Grimes, the attorney, was still unconscious, but had been conscious long enough to tell the doctor that he did not know who assaulted him. He wanted to know if Tombstone Jones was still alive.

They met the sheriff after supper and he stopped Tombstone.

"I reckon it's time for me to get straight on this deal. What is Grimes' interest in you, and why was he beaten up like that? What's the idea of anyone warnin' you two, and how did you three happen to find the body of Dave Morris today?"

"What's yore theory?" asked Tombstone soberly.

"Theory?"

"Yeah, you ort to have one. Personally, I ain't got any."

"You don't know what this is all about, Tombstone?"

"If I did, Buck, I'd either be runnin' or shootin'."

"I see-e-e. Let me ask yuh a straight question—are you Adam Jones?"

"My name is Jones," replied Tombstone, "and you can make yore own guesses on the first name."

"All right," growled the sheriff. "Tell me who the dude is, and why he's here?"

"He says his name is Harold Ashley Wentworth. You'll have to make a guess on the last question, 'cause he ain't said."

"Why do you think Dave Morris was murdered, Tombstone?"

"Why, Buck, that ain't a fair question. I never even knew the gent."

Buck Lorimer sighed deeply. "I reckon yuh're as dumb as I am."

"And that would make a interestin' contest, Buck," remarked Tombstone. "We could charge admission and have a sheepherder ask the questions."

"Elmer don't know a blasted thing either," sighed Buck.

"We'd let Elmer hold our hats."

They ran into Elmer Potts and Elmer said he wasn't going back to the Bar J with them.

"You ain't scared, are yuh, El-mer?" asked Speedy.

"I blamed well am! You've been

warned and that blasted dude has been warned. When they start shootin', Elmer Potts won't mean nothin' a-tall to them bullets."

"If yuh're scared, what do yuh think about us?" asked Tombstone.

"I think yuh're crazy to stay here. I done told Buck that I wasn't goin' back there tonight, not even to keep my job. No use of me bein' killed, watchin' 'em get you two."

"You shore paint a bright future for us," said Speedy.

"What do you think?" asked Elmer.

"I think we'll go back and see what happens."

"All right, it's yore funeral. Wait a minute. In case yuh both get killed t'night, will it be all right for me to tell Buck about that cow and calf?"

"Just be shore we ain't playin' possum," replied Tombstone.

THEIR horses had been left at the sheriff's stable.

"I just happened to remember somethin', pardner," Speedy said. "We've still got to go to the Bar J, and the road might not be open for us."

"Yea-a-a-ah!" whispered Tombstone. "That's right. I'll tell yuh what we'll do, Speedy, we'll ride alone. They'll be lookin' for two of us. You go first, and I'll be about a halfmile behind yuh."

"Why do I go first?"

"I've allus said you are braver than me. I've allus said, 'That Speedy Smith would walk right into a tiger's den, barehanded. He's got more cold nerve than most anybody.'"

"Yeah," agreed Speedy. "I'd do it. Find me a tiger's den."

"Well, are yuh goin' to be a hero, or do we stay in town all night?" said Tombstone wearily.

"Oh, I'll go first," said Speedy. "Give me about five minutes head start. And I ain't goin' too fast. I'll kind of go *poco-poco*, so they won't figure I'm in any hurry."

Tombstone sat down in the heavy shadow and waited, giving Speedy sufficient time. In fact, he gave him more time than agreed upon. Then Tombstone mounted and headed for the ranch. He didn't hurry either. There was only starlight tonight.

Tombstone came in sight of the ranchhouse, but drew up quickly. The ranchhouse was too well lighted. At least, it seemed that way to Tombstone. He wondered if Speedy had gone straight to the house.

He was sitting there in the heavy shadow of a clump of old cottonwoods, when he heard the sound of slow hoofbeats behind him. Swiftly he reined off the road. The rider came slowly around the cottonwoods and drew up almost in the exact place where Tombstone had stopped.

"Speedy!" Tombstone said.

"Huh?" grunted Speedy. "Oh, hello. I wondered where yuh was."

Tombstone rode out beside him.

"That house looks awful well lighted, seems to me," Speedy said.

"Where-at you been?" queried Tombstone. "You started ten minutes ahead of me. How'd yuh git behind me, thataway?"

"Well, sir," replied Speedy soberly, "I hate to admit it, but I got lost."

"Lost? How could yuh git lost? There's only one road."

"I'm goin' to have to go back there in daylight and find out what I done wrong."

"You let me come out here ahead of yuh," accused Tombstone.

"I've got to git me a compass, I can see that," declared Speedy.

"You yallered-up on me, that's what happened. I never thought I'd live to re'lize such a thing, Speedy."

"You ain't through the night yet. What's our best move?"

"We've got to investigate that house," replied Tombstone. "I've got me a hunch that things ain't right. Nobody bothered us in town nor on the road."

"Mebbe they're scared of us, Tombstone."

"Uh-huh, that's possible. Mebbe I'm the only brave man left."

"Aw, I wasn't scared," protested Speedy. "I got m'self lost."

"Yea-a-ah? And me comin' along that dark road, hummin' a song, as carefree as a bird."

"Stop scarin' yoreself. There wasn't nobody along the road. Let's ditch these broncs in the brush."

They tied the horses in the heavy shadows of the cottonwoods and went cautiously through the brush. The slope of the hill was well brushed all the way to the fence near the west side of the house, but not high enough to cover their approach.

They were within about a hundred feet of the dwelling, when they heard hoofbeats on the road, going toward the house. It was too dark for them to see the number of riders, until they came up in front of the ranchhouse.

"Two," whispered Speedy.

"Anybody home?" they heard a voice call. "This is Buck Lorimer!"

"The sheriff!" grunted Tombstone. "I reckon it's all right now."

Someone must have answered their hail, because both men went into the house. Tombstone and Speedy relaxed.

"Don't tell anybody we crawled a hundred yards in cactus," Speedy said.

"Wait a minute!" whispered Tombstone. "Look! Somebody is takin' the horses down toward the stable!"

They hunkered in the low brush and tried to figure out why the sheriff should take his horse to the stable. Tombstone sniffed audibly.

"Turnin' bloodhound already?" Speedy said.

AGAIN Tombstone sniffed several more times.

"Speedy, you ain't usin' per-fume, are yuh?"

"Perfume? No, I don't reckon I am. At least, I ain't conscious of any odd smell about me."

"Can't yuh smell none?"

Speedy sniffed. Then he sniffed several times real fast.

"By golly, I do smell somethin'!" he whispered. "It smells like some kind of perfume, too."

Tombstone wet the end of a finger and tested the faint breeze. The scent came from almost due north of where they were. "I can smell it plainer now," Tombstone muttered, and started crawling off to his left. Speedy remained where he was, looking toward the lighted building, while Tombstone snaked his way toward a taller clump of bushes.

About two minutes later Speedy heard a low whistle, and began crawling toward the sound. He found Tombstone.

"I done found the per-fume!" Tombstone said. "It's Marion!"

"Marion?" gasped Speedy. "She ain't —huh?"

"She's all right, now. Hog-tied and gagged."

Marion was sitting up in the brush, almost hysterical, and Tombstone was trying to get the story from her, as Speedy crawled in close.

"Now, just be calm," said Tombstone. "Yuh're all right now. Masked men captured yuh, and brung yuh out here. They've got Harold and Sody in the house. That's all plain enough."

"They said they didn't want to hurt me," she whispered. "They said I'd be found after it was all over."

"That's fine, Marion. After what's all over?"

"I don't know."

"Mebbe they're figurin' on burnin' the house," suggested Speedy.

"I—I don't know," whispered Marion. "I heard one of the men say, 'There's enough to blow this ranch off the map.'"

"Blow the ranch off the map?" whispered Speedy. "That sounds like dynamite. Yuh don't suppose—"

"What else did yuh hear, Marion?" asked Tombstone.

"Well, I heard one man say, 'You can't time a thing like that with a fuse,' and another one said, 'We don't need to. That battery is still hot.'"

"Wait a minute!" exclaimed Speedy.

(Turn page)

Kidneys Must Remove Excess Acids

Help 15 Miles of Kidney Tubes Flush Out Poisonous Waste

If you have an excess of acids in your blood, your 15 miles of kidney tubes may be overworked. These tiny filters and tubes are working day and night to help Nature rid your system of excess acids and poisonous waste.

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(Adv.)

"Marion, did John Adam Jones ever do any blastin' around here?"

"They blew out the stumps of all those big cottonwoods when they put in those new corrals. But that was almost a year ago."

"Heavenly angels!" breathed Speedy. "That's a awful situation."

"Dynamite, huh?" grunted Tombstone. "Not nice."

"Listen," said Speedy. "They've got Harold and Sody tied up in there and—Oh, my gosh, they've got the sheriff, too! Him and Elmer walked in on the deal. And they're—waitin'—for—us!"

"Yea-a-a-ah!" breathed Tombstone. "Well, well! Huh! Waitin' for me and you! Well, we'll just fool 'em. We won't go in. More'n one way to skin a cat, I've allus said."

"You can quit sayin' it," sighed Speedy. "If we don't show up, they just can't let 'em loose. Don'tcha realize that they'll cut that there boompowder loose, anyway, before they quit the place?"

"Do yuh think they would, Speedy?"

"Just as shore as the good Lord made little apples. And when Ike and Sil come back from Painted Fork, they'll be added to the casualties."

"I wouldn't worry about them two," said Tombstone soberly.

"Yuh wouldn't? Yuh're awful callus tonight, my friend."

"That's right. I've been a-buildin' up them calluses for several days. Well, what's to be done, I wonder. We just can't walk in and tell 'em to cease and go home. Marion, do yuh feel better?"

"I'm all right," she replied. "They didn't hurt me."

"Yuh didn't recognize any voices?" asked Speedy.

"No, I didn't. They all seemed to have bad colds."

"We might go to town and get a lot of men to help us," suggested Tombstone. "We could surround the place."

"No good," replied Speedy decisively. "We don't need witnesses to the explosion. This deal is goin' to need brains—and luck."

"I'll furnish the brains," said Tombstone seriously.

"We're sunk with all on board," sighed Speedy.

"Marion, I've got a idea," whispered Tombstone. "You yell for help. Not too loud, now. They'll think you got the gag loose. Just yell, 'Help! Help!'"

Marion was still frightened enough to do a very good job, and her voice carried well. There was not a sound after the echo of her yelp for help died away.

"Keep down low, and don't shoot, unless yuh have to, Speedy," Tombstone whispered.

"Somebody comin'!" hissed Speedy. "And he's comin' fast!"

CHAPTER VIII

Dynamite

EVEN from where they were, they could hear a man climb over the fence. He came through the brush, with no thought of caution. Suddenly he loomed up over them, stumbling, searching for the captive, swearing quietly. Suddenly his knees were caught in a pair of encircling arms, and he went forward over Tombstone Jones, clawing for his balance. He came down with a crash in the brush. Before he could get his breath and yell a warning, Speedy's two bony knees landed on his back, and Speedy's forty-five slashed across the back of his head.

"One baby down—one see-gar!" panted Tombstone, shoving the man's legs aside and getting back to his knees. "Did yuh pet him hard enough, Speedy?"

"Well, I didn't hold back, if that's what yuh mean."

"We'll use Marion's ropes on him, just to be sure."

It was rather a queer tableau inside the main room of the Bar J ranchhouse. Two lamps were burning brightly, one on the table, the other lamp on the mantle of the old fireplace. In the center of the room was an object about four feet high, possibly about the same length, the dimensions being problematical, because the whole thing was draped with an old blanket. Small, black wires snaked from under it, disappearing into the kitchen.

Roped back to back, sitting on kitchen chairs beside this object, were Buck Lorimer and Elmer Potts, and Harold Ashley Wentworth and Sody White. All four men were gagged with cloths, only

their eyes showing. All they could do was look, and from the expression in their eyes, they didn't like what they could see.

The only sound was the monotonous ticking of the old clock on the mantle. The shades were all down. The four men were making no attempt to get loose, because they had tried it many times but to no avail. All they could do was wait, and they knew what they were waiting for—the arrival of Tombstone Jones and Speedy Smith, who had just finished hog-tieing their captive.

They had no idea who he was, and they didn't want to light a match.

"You stay right here," Tombstone said to Marion. "This feller can't hurt yuh none. Speedy, you crawl as far as the fence. If they start shootin', pick out some victim that ain't over six feet tall. I'm goin' to walk in and see what's goin' on."

Tombstone walked boldly over to the fence, crawled over it and went slowly toward the house. It was too dark to distinguish objects clearly. A man called to him quietly from near the front of the house:

"Is it all right?"

"Yeah," replied Tombstone huskily. "She got the gag loose."

"Good thing yuh got her. You go down in the corral with Ike. I'm scared he'll lose his nerve."

Tombstone walked around the rear of the house and went down to the corral fence. He had no idea where to find Ike. He bumped into the fence, and he heard Ike Bradley's voice.

"Is that you, Jim?" Bradley asked.

"Yeah," grunted Tombstone, feeling his way through the poles of the corral-fence.

Ike Bradley, just a darker blur in the darkness, was hunched down behind a pile of corral posts. Tombstone hunched in beside him, gun in hand.

"Why don't they come, I wonder," Ike Bradley said. "I'm gettin' nervous. The worst of it is we are not even sure whether this old battery will work. I don't know how to test the blasted thing. And if that thing don't work, where will we be? And if it does work—"

Thud! The complaining cowpoke sagged sideways, sighed heavily and slid on his ear in the corral dust, as Tombstone fended him away from the blasting battery. A well-swung six-gun is a certain anesthetic.

Tombstone leaned forward and felt over the blasting battery, of which he knew nothing at all. He found the wires, yanked them loose and tossed the battery aside. At least there would be no exploding spark shot into that dynamite in the house.

He crawled away across the corral, and was at a corner near the stable, when a man went across the yard and toward the spot which Tombstone had just left.

"Where's Jim?" the man asked quietly.

NATURALLY, there was no answer. The man crawled through the fence, and he must have found the sleeping Ike Bradley, because he went right back, through the fence. He stopped and called:

"Sil! Where are yuh, Sil?"

A voice answered from near the stable, and Tombstone saw the man hurrying over to join the man beside the corral fence. Tombstone had no idea what move to make now. There were only two men left of the four. He was too far away to hear their conversation, but he saw them hurrying toward the house.

The kitchen door closed behind them, and Tombstone went swiftly toward the front of the house. He didn't know where Speedy was, and he didn't want to call him.

As he hesitated there he heard a crash in the house, the thud of a revolver shot, and hurrying feet. Tombstone ran to the back door, which opened easily and quietly. Through the entrance to the main room, slightly hazy now with powder smoke, he could see two of the men roped back to back in their chairs.

"So yuh thought yuh could come right in through a window, eh?" a voice said.

"I blamed near made it," replied Speedy, panting heavily.

"Tie him up!" snarled a voice. "At least, we've got one of 'em!"

"Not the one we want. Wait! Make this feller call to his pardner. If he won't come, we'll kill this'n. He's alone, and we'll git him. Look, you, bug-eyed, little road-runner, stick yore head through that winder and call Tombstone Jones. Tell him that we'll kill all five of yuh right now, if he don't come here with his hands in the air."

"He won't come," replied Speedy.

"He won't eh? Why won't he?"

"He's superstitious."

"You blasted fool!" snarled one of them. "Is this any time to be funny? Do what I told yuh or I'll pull this trigger."

"Yuh missed me once—yuh might do it ag'in. Still, yuh might not. All right, I'll call him, but it won't do any good, I tell yuh."

"It won't eh? Well, you try it and we'll judge the results."

Speedy limped over to the open window, menaced from behind by two guns and leaned out over the sill.

"Tombstone, where are yuh?" he yelled.

"Hold it, everybody!" snapped Tombstone. "Don't turn around!"

He had stepped in through the doorway to the kitchen, and caught both masked men with their backs to him. They froze for a moment.

"Drop them guns!" snapped Tombstone.

One man obeyed, but the other man, screaming a curse, whirled, dropped to his knees and fired one shot into the blanket-covered pile on the floor.

Echoing the report was the crash of Tombstone's forty-five, and the man who took a chance of exploding the dynamite, sprawled sideways, turned half-over and flung his gun aside. The last man dived for the open window, making a last desperate attempt at escape, but Speedy blocked him, knocked him back into the room, and he fell with his shoulders against the piled dynamite.

"Nice work, pardner!" exclaimed Tombstone. "Keep him docile."

He yanked the mask off the man he had shot, and disclosed the face of Cort Haden who would never face a court of law. The other man was Sil Kerr, snarling, cursing, as Speedy rubbed the muzzle of his gun against Kerr's nose, while Tombstone untied the four men.

Both Sody and Harold were on the point of collapse, but managed to grin weakly, glad to be alive, and wondering how it ever had happened. Elmer fairly whooped with joy, but Buck Lorimer just looked dumbly at Tombstone and Speedy.

"Where is Marion?" Harold said huskily.

"Allus thinkin' of the ladies," grinned Speedy. "I'll get her."

"I'll lock up this whippoorwill," said Elmer, and handcuffed Sil Kerr. Sheriff Buck Lorimer walked over and looked at Kerr.

"You dirty polecat," said Buck. "What have you got to say?"

"Not a blasted thing!" snapped Sil. Tombstone laughed at him.

"We found Marion," he told him. "She yelled for help and we put the help out of commission. Then I took his place and went down to the corral and busted Ike Bradley on the noggin. Yo're goin' to do a little talkin', Sil, or you'll hang for this. Talkin' may help yuh out, yuh know. If you don't talk, Ike or this feller they call Jim might get ahead of yuh. How long have you and Bradley been brandin' Bar J calves with the Lazy H mark?"

"Over a year," growled Kerr.

"You and Bradley killed Dave Morris in that pot-hole and then yuh shot John Adam Jones, but he got away."

"I did not!" snapped Kerr. "Cort Haden and Bradley done it. I wasn't there."

"You and Bradley beat Grimes to make him tell who we are."

"Cort Haden and Jim Stevens done that. Me and Bradley wasn't in on that deal either. Dave Morris was a private cattle detective. Blast him, he found out the same thing you found out later."

"Well, that clears Johnny Neil," said Tombstone. "Oh, there's Marion and Speedy."

MARION came in her eyes wide.

"Marion, Johnny is cleared," Tombstone said. "Yuh don't need to worry any more."

Then Tombstone turned back to the sullen-faced Kerr.

"Sil," he said quietly, "Cort Haden is dead, and you can tell us the truth—if yuh know what I'm askin'. Where did Haden git that note for fifteen thousand dollars, signed by John Adam Jones?"

Sil Kerr scowled at Tombstone, glanced over at the body of Cort Haden, and nodded slowly.

"It can't hurt nobody now," he said. "Jones got drunk over at the Lazy H one night, when him and Cort was playin' two-handed poker. Jones' eyes was awful bad and he was drunk. He didn't have no more money and Cort had him sign a note for a hundred and fifty dollars, only he made it fifteen thousand, and the old man never read it."

There was a long silence.

"Well, I reckon that's all, folks,"

Tombstone said finally. "Johnny's free and the Bar J don't owe the Lazy H a cent. In fact, the Lazy H owes the Bar J plenty."

"And we'll see that it gets paid," said Buck quietly. Then he turned and looked at Tombstone Jones.

"Are you really Adam Jones?" he asked. Tombstone shook his head.

"This is no time to lie," he said. "I ain't."

"Then Johnny Neil will get the ranch, if Adam don't show up."

"Adam Jones is dead—so Grimes told me," said Tombstone. "I took the name to keep Cort Haden from takin' over the ranch."

"Now," said Sheriff Buck Lorimer, turning to Harold Ashley Wentworth, "just who on earth are you, young fellow? Everybody is guessin'. Are you from the Pinkerton outfit?"

Harold stared at him and broke out laughing.

"History repeats itself, Mr. Lorimer," he said. "My name is Wentworth, and I am not a detective. Forty years ago my father came on a hunting trip to this country, and he met a man named John Adam Jones. My father left all this in writing to me. He was a very wealthy man, if I may brag a little. Through circumstances, while here in the West, he was mistaken for a Pinkerton detective. An outlaw tried to kill him, but his life was saved by John Adam Jones.

"Quite a number of years later, John Adam Jones, writing to my father, said that he was broke and would be obliged to sell his ranch and cattle to pay his debts. My father, greatly indebted to Mr. Jones, bought the ranch, but told Mr. Jones to never mention it. On my way to the West Coast, I stopped to see what my father owned. The deed was never recorded. I believe that is the reason Mr. Jones never made out a will."

Harold reached in his pocket and took out a long wallet, opened it and took out a folded legal paper which he handed to the sheriff. After a quick perusal, the sheriff nodded.

"That is the deed to the Bar J," he said.

Then Harold Ashley Wentworth did a queer thing. They watched him tear the deed into small pieces and throw them into the fireplace.

"But," protested the sheriff, "that is yore only evidence that yuh own the Bar J, Wentworth."

"Good!" exclaimed Harold. "I waive all rights—if Johnny and this girl get it. Just between us, I've had all I want of either sudden or lingering death. Marion, with all my—no, I won't say it is with all my worldly goods—but I do endow you with the Bar J."

"I don't know what to say," said Marion weakly. "Everything is wonderful. And I didn't do anything to help anybody."

"Don't believe her," said Speedy. "If she hadn't worn perfume, we'd probly all be fitted to harps right now."

"There's a lot of things I don't quite get," said the sheriff.

"That's a normal condition." Elmer grinned at him. "Yuh know, me and Buck figured that Harold was a detective, but we couldn't figure out Tombstone and Speedy. We knew blasted well that they couldn't be detectives. Just why did you two fellers come down into Pintado Valley, anyway, Tombstone?"

"Well, I'll tell yuh," said Tombstone soberly. "I was comin' to a masquerade, and Speedy just came trailin' along for the ride."

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THE MARSHAL OF GOLDFORK

When Jube Kern pits himself against "Happyjack" Ristine, the town's gun-boss, there's a coffin in readiness for the loser!

CHAPTER I

Law-Badge Rendezvous

SPRING THAWS had belatedly released the grip of snowdrifts from the Mother Lode wagon roads and up from Sacramento a Wells-Fargo stage thrust deep into the High Sierras, spearheading the first influx of the year's traffic to the gold camps.

Ahead of the mud-spattered Concord and the freight wagons queued in its ruts, the news sped from camp to camp and from claim to claim, to reach the end-of-trail boom town at Goldfork a day in advance of the coach's arrival.

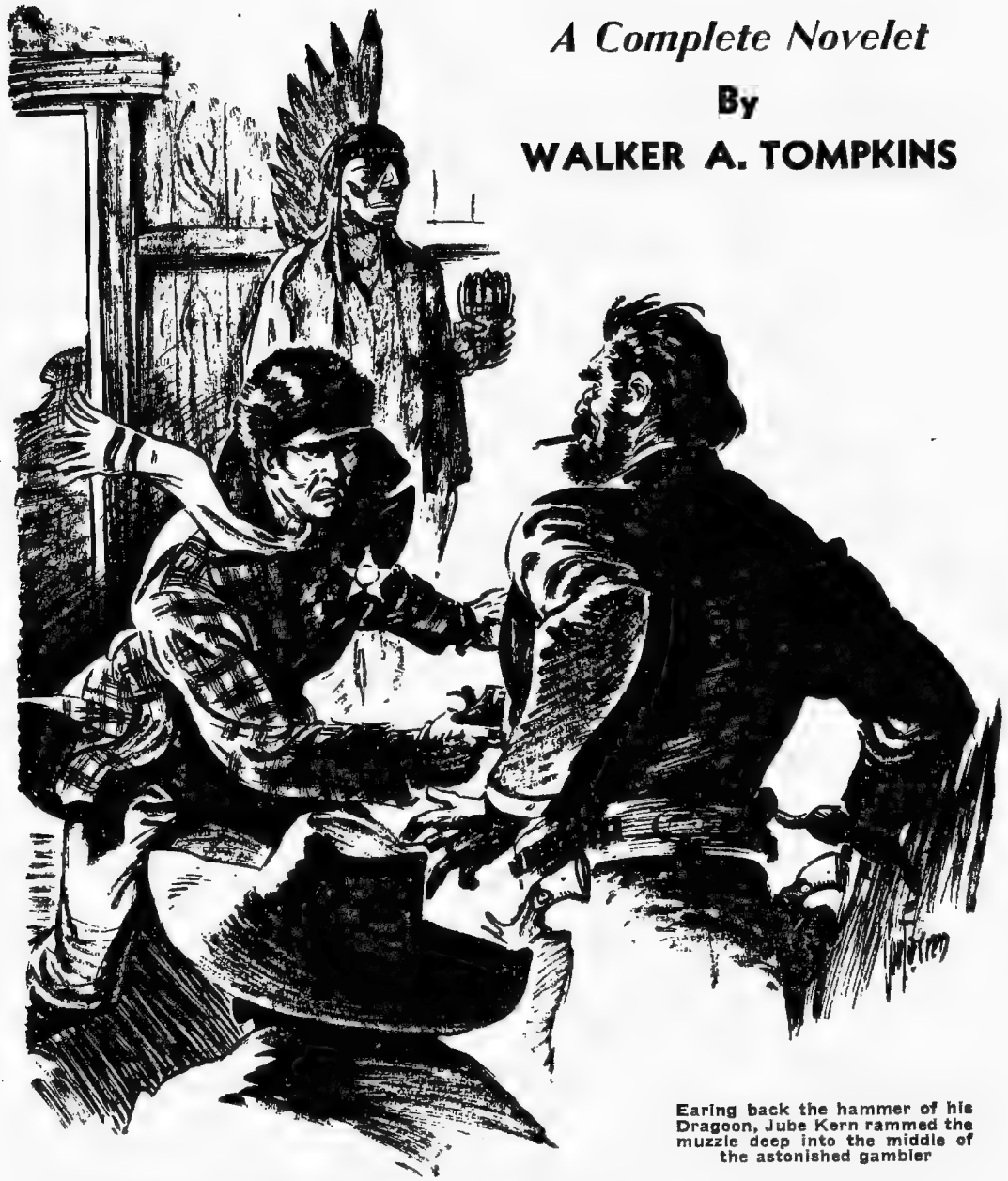
A motley army of jackleg muckers converged on the town strung out along the gulch of Beardog Creek, massing in front of the Wells-Fargo station to welcome the first freight and mail in five snowbound months.

And in the privacy of his saloon office over the Jackpot Saloon "Happyjack" Ristine oiled and loaded his Dragoon .45s for the first time that winter, cursing himself for a nervous fool as he did so.

A Complete Novelet

By

WALKER A. TOMPKINS



Earing back the hammer of his Dragoon, Jube Kern rammed the muzzle deep into the middle of the astonished gambler

Zeno Malone, albino-haired bartender and Ristine's righthand man, stood at the window overlooking Goldfork's main street and sensed the electric tension which gripped the waiting miners below. Perhaps he alone had an inkling of the strain Ristine was undergoing today, in the tense period of waiting for destiny to arrive on the first stagecoach of the year.

The acknowledged gun-boss of Goldfork, Ristine was a man with few friends and no confidants, a gambling man who rarely carried guns but who paid well for the loyalty and straight shooting of his underlings.

"Kern won't be aboard that stage, you can bet your last blue chip on that, Boss," Malone commented tentatively, turning his rabbit-pink eyes toward Ristine as the gambler attempted to flex the useless tendons of his bullet-ruined right hand. "He's either dead or paralyzed, and you know it. I—I never seen you spooked like this before, Happyjack."

The quick anger in Ristine's eyes silenced the bartender, made the albino regret his impetuous remark. A man didn't

doubt Happyjack Ristine's courage, or if he did he kept the heresy to himself.

"You don't know Jubal Kern," Ristine said, and buckled on his gun harness under the fustian tails of his steelpen coat.

NO ONE in Goldfork had taken Jube Kern's farewell threat very seriously, that snowy night last November when the boom camp marshal had left the diggings with Ristine's derringer bullet imbedded in his back, vanishing into the teeth of a blizzard that was the first harbinger of winter to the Southern Mines.

"Look for me back on the first stage next spring, Ristine!" the wounded lawman had vowed, propping himself up on the warped pine door which had been laid across the stagecoach seats in lieu of a stretcher. "I'm leaving my lawbadge in your saloon so you won't forget I aim to show up again and finish this thing. And I'll bring a coffin back with me when I come—for the loser."

Happyjack Ristine, the snowflakes stark on his black Dundrearie whiskers and his right arm cradled in a sling, had nodded and given the only answer a boom camp gun-boss could have given in front of the awed crowd:

"Goldfork carries all the law it needs on its hip, Kern. But your tin star will be waiting for you. And about that coffin —make sure you order a long one, marshal. You're a tall man."

At which the express jehu, with an anxious eye canted to the storm clouds racking over the sugar pines to westward, had larruped his Morgans down the muddy street and vanished into the thickening limbo that presaged a November blizzard. . . .

Roundsiding about it later over gaming tables and along the various saloon bars in Goldfork, the miners who were working the placer claims over the winter were unanimous on one thing: Jube Kern wouldn't be back, his vow to the contrary.

More than likely the blizzard would trap the Wells-Fargo Concord before it reached the Sierra foothills, in which case the driver and shotgun guard would be lucky to escape with their own lives. Then there was the .41 pellet which Happyjack Ristine's sleeve gun had sent smashing into the marshal's side.

According to "Sawbones" McGuffy, the local medico, Ristine's bullet had lodged in the marshal's backbone and even if gangrene didn't get him, Jube Kern was doomed to spend the rest of his days paralyzed from the waist down.

That had been five months ago, a hiatus during which Goldfork had been isolated from California and the outside world.

Braver tongues, made foolhardy by over-indulgence in rotgut whisky, had gossiped vaguely about the two Chileño bushwackers Happyjack Ristine purportedly had sent to trail Kern's stage, to make sure the wounded marshal didn't get to San Francisco.

Maybe Ristine had done that, maybe not. Two of his Chileño bouncers at the Jackpot Saloon had never been seen since the night of the blizzard. That much was fact.

Kern had left a memento of his last shoot-out in Goldfork. His bullet, fired in self-defense while in the act of arresting the Jackpot owner for defying the camp's gun-toting law, had ruined the gambler's right hand for keeps. It was problematical whether Kern had lived to reach the surgeons in 'Frisco who had the skill to probe out the derringer slug in his spine.

No one in Goldfork, Zeno Malone least of all, would ever forget how Marshal Jube Kern had dragged his paralyzed body across the barroom floor, after Ristine had fled to the sanctuary of his upstairs office. A pig-tailed Chinese swamper had helped the wounded lawman to his feet at the door and, in sight of all, Kern had unpinned the law badge from his mackinaw.

Ristine had vowed publicly that he would force Kern to surrender the star that had been bestowed upon him by the Miners' Law & Order Committee two years before, when Goldfork was fast becoming the wildest gold camp in the Mother Lode.

But Jube Kern's gesture had been a symbol of defiance rather than surrender. With his flagging strength, the marshal stuck the tin star on the breast of the cigar-store Indian by the doorway, an effigy dubbed "Helldorado Harry" by the saloon customers.

"Tell Ristine—I'll be back—to get that star," Kern had said, before the Chinese swamper carried him over to Sawbones McGuffy's shanty on the gulch rim.

And the law badge of Goldfork camp had remained where Kern had pinned it,

on Helldorado Harry's cedarwood brisket, through the long winter months which followed.

EVEN after the bandages were removed from his bullet-butchered gun hand, Happyjack Ristine had elected to leave the badge where it was. It made a curio that appealed to the morbid element in the diggings, attracting trade to the Jackpot. It was a tangible monument, too, to the fact that Ristine had lived up to his boast that no Miners' Committee marshal would ever enforce his gun-toting law in the Jackpot Saloon.

Thus Helldorado Harry, the wooden statue with a tomahawk in one fist and a bunch of wood-carved cigars in the other, had been Goldfork's only marshal following Kern's departure. It was taken for granted that the wounded lawman would never return to claim his badge.

"The grapevine says a caravan of freight wagons are followin' the express coach, boss," Zeno Malone spoke up, bridging the awkward silence which had fallen between them. "They crossed the upper fork of the Stanislaus around sundown last night. You ain't got long to wait—to find out the worst."

Happyjack Ristine moved to the window, scowling down at the jostling throng of bearded and mackinaw-clad men who had been drawn to the camp from near and far.

There were husbands and fathers in that shaggy multitude who would get their first mail from home and loved ones since snow had started to fly. There were business men who had seen the long winter deplete their stock and who were awaiting shipments of flour and drygoods and tools and ammunition in the loaded Conestogas which rumor said were on their way.

Ristine himself had a mercenary interest in the arrival of the first freighters from the valley, for the Jackpot's bar, like its rival establishment, had been as dry as an old boot for going on six weeks now. Zeno Malone had a dozen barrels of whisky coming, for which a host of thirsty miners would part with a substantial portion of their winter's dust by nightfall.

Somewhere down the gulch a shotgun boomed in signal and jubilant shouts came relaying up to the boom camp, kindling a frenzy in the close-packed men waiting at the Wells-Fargo barn.

From his elevated lookout in the upper-story window of the Jackpot, Ristine caught sight of a mud-camouflaged Concord rounding the gulch road half a mile below, a team of Morgans straining at the tugstraps to pull the season's first stage through the hub-deep mire.

Behind lumbered the canvas-hooded freight wagons drawn by tandem-hitched mules.

"Get out there and be ready to make a cash bid in case some speculator has a stock of liquor to auction off, Zeno," Ristine ordered his chalk-skinned bartender. "We'll need all the firewater we can get. This will be the most hell-roaring night in Goldfork's history, mark my word on that!"

Following Malone down the stairs from the mezzanine gambling cubicles to the main barroom, Happyjack Ristine caught the glitter of the law badge on the cigar-store Indian, reflected like a planet in the backbar mirror.

Since Jube Kern had imbedded the emblem in the statue's chest against this fateful day, its nickeled surface had been furbished to glittery brilliance by the countless sleeves that had rubbed it for good luck.

From an iron strong-box under the bar counter, Ristine took a bottle of rye which had not been placed on public sale, the last good whisky remaining in the drought-ridden camp. He poured himself a stiff dram, threw back his head and tossed the fiery drink down his gullet at a single gulp.

"He won't be on that stage," Ristine whispered to his image in the backbar glass. His numb, twisted fingers shook, dropping the whisky glass with a tinkling crash at his feet. "Kern was dead before he hit Sacramento."

The stagecoach was creaking to a halt across the street when Ristine shouldered through the swing doors and leaned against an awning post on the Jackpot porch.

Reddish Sierra mud had completely stoppered the spokes of the Concord's wheels. The coach jounced on its bullhide thoroughbraces as the passengers started alighting here at road's end. Ristine's pulses upped their tempo as he watched the travelers climb out, ticking them off one by one.

THREE dudes from the States, come to El Dorado to seek their fortunes

in the gold fields. A portly drummer for a Los Angeles beef rancho. Old Ike Gration, the truant wheelwright who had let winter catch him on a trip down below. And that was all. The Concord door swung shut of its own weight.

Pent-up breaths sighed through the crowd. Jubal Kern had not made good on his vow to return on the spring's first stage. It had been a dying man's brag, a face-saving gesture on the part of a lawman who had been unable to tame California's toughest gold camp.

A hundred pairs of eyes swiveled to catch Happyjack Ristine's reaction, but the gambler's narrow face was inscrutable, showing neither relief nor vindication, the mask of a gambler in perfect control of himself.

Ristine took a Cuban cheroot from his flowered waistcoat and bit off the end, jabbing the black weed in his teeth and fumbling with the stiff fingers of his game hand in a pocket of his steelpen coat for flint and steel. In the act of lighting the cigar, Ristine froze, eyes narrowed in stunned disbelief as he stared over the heads of the throng.

The Concord's mud-spattered door swung open and a tall figure in moleskin pants and beaver hat and red-checkered mackinaw stood poised on the iron step, ice-blue eyes shuttling over the crowd as if drinking in a familiar scene before alighting from the vehicle.

"*Jube Kern!* The marshal's come back to Goldfork!"

The whisper passed from lip to lip until the chant reached Ristine's ears.

"And he's brought a coffin with him. Hanged if he ain't!"

CHAPTER II

Coffin Consignment

FOR the first time, the street mob took notice of the long black box lashed to the roof of the Concord, a crate which by its sinister dimensions and the off-square angles of its side walls could be mistaken for nothing but a grave casket.

Spring sunlight threw harsh shadows across the gaunt face of the marshal, revealing the stamp of past suffering there, revealing a pallor gained from long months in a hospital, an ordeal that had threaded the young giant's thick brown hair with a sprinkle of silver.

Then Kern stepped down into the ankle deep ooze, his towering figure looming head-high above the throng as his sour gaze raked the sea of familiar faces.

An aisle spread in the press of bodies then. An aisle which angled across the street to the steps of the Jackpot Saloon where Happyjack Ristine stood transfixed by a porch post.

Jube Kern, walking with a slight limp which hadn't been there half a year ago, headed toward Ristine's saloon with his eyes holding the vacant, off-focus stare of a man who had come to the end of a long and gruelling journey.

"Hey, Mister Kern!" the Wells-Fargo driver called after him, whipping his lines around the jacob staff and standing up in the stage boot. "Where do you want this here coffin took?"

Kern halted, turning slowly to regard the Wells-Fargo man.

"Oh! Unload it at Colton's Gold Exchange, will you, Jeb? You'll need two-three men to help you. It's heavy."

Happyjack Ristine, his usual florid countenance bleached ashen behind purling cigar smoke, unbuttoned his Prince Albert to expose the polished buckles of twin gunbelts as the marshal of Goldfork climbed the saloon steps and paused at arm's length from the gambler.

Converging waves of humanity closed in the gap in the crowd, the churning sound of hobbed boots in the mud being the only noise that disturbed the gelid quiet.

"I've come for my badge, Happyjack."

The cheroot twitched between Ristine's clamped teeth. He jerked his head toward the slatted halfdoors.

"It's where you left it, Marshal."

Boots thudded on the plank floor of the porch as the crowd pressed in, eyes riveted on the two enemies as they stepped into the barroom. The doors fanned behind them but they could tell that Jube Kern had halted before the hawk-faced wooden statue of Helldorado Harry.

Knots of muscle flicked under Ristine's sable Dundrearies as he watched the marshal tug the nickel-plated star from the cigar-store Indian and pin it to

the fabric of his mackinaw lapel.

There were elements of melodrama in Kern's act, but the marshal's clean-shaven face held no hint of bravado as he wheeled to face the saloonkeeper at his elbow.

"How many killings," he asked bluntly, "have there been in Goldfork since I went below, Ristine?"

The gambler flicked ash from the glowing tip of his cheroot, eyeing the lawman with the queer musing of a man who would never make the mistake of underestimating an adversary.

"Suppose we put our cards on the table, Jube," Ristine proposed finally. "You and I had our differences in the past. I figure neither of us has anything to gain by—"

"You claimed Goldfork didn't need a lawman!" Kern cut in. "You've had five months to prove it, Ristine. There was an average of a killing a week in your saloon alone before the Miners' Law and Order Committee appointed me marshal. I trimmed that figure considerable. Now I aim to find out if the diggings tamed down of its own accord while I was away. If all this needless bloodshed tapered off, maybe you're right. Maybe Goldfork don't need a marshal."

Ristine sucked at his cheroot thoughtfully, stalling for time. Finally he held out his withered right hand, livid with scar tissue and knobby with poorly knitted bones, showing the marshal where his bullet had wrecked the hand beyond repair.

"Frisco patched you up as good as ever, Kern," the gambler said evasively. "As you see, I'll carry your brand as long as I live. Don't you figure our accounts are evened up? Ain't Goldfork big enough to hold the two of us?"

JUBE KERN leaned an elbow against the wooden Indian, easing the weight off a hip that would never be quite right again, despite the miracle of surgery that had removed Ristine's bullet from his spinal column and patched up the damaged nerves there.

At thirty-five, Kern had suffered tortures and the mark of that agony had added ten years to his appearance. But his level eyes had lost none of their candor, his brain none of its rare understanding of what made men tick.

Staring at Happyjack Ristine now, Kern did not make the error of assuming that his sworn enemy was going soft, yielding to the pressure of public opinion. Ristine was volunteering a truce between them, knowing even as he spoke, that Goldfork was not big enough for both of them and never would be again.

"It goes far deeper than mere personal hatred between the two of us, Ristine," the marshal argued grimly. "It's the wild element you represent, the hoodlums who have given Goldfork its reputation for being a sinkhole of outlawry."

"But I give my customers what they—"

"Let me finish, Ristine. The decent citizens of this camp have paid me to stamp out the gun-law you represent. I didn't come back into the Mother Lode country to accept any compromises with you or any of your stripe, Ristine."

Cold lights flickered in the gambler's hooded eyes. He hunched his big shoulders inside the fustian steelpen, recognizing the lawman's ultimatum and electing to stand pat.

"What do you aim to do first, Marshal?" he inquired coldly.

Jube Kern reached in a pocket of his mackinaw and drew out a folded cardboard placard. Without comment, he handed it to Ristine. It was a duplicate of the poster which Kern had had printed over in Sonora and tacked on walls and fence posts around Goldfork the previous fall.

NO GUN TOTING IN GOLDFORK!

Effective at sundown this date, it will be illegal for any citizen of Goldfork and vicinity to carry weapons, concealed or otherwise, while inside the limits of this camp. Rifles, pistols and shotguns will be checked with the undersigned at the Goldfork jailhouse on Nugget Street upon entering town, and will be redeemable upon departure. The above ruling applies to blackjacks, brass knuckles, shot-loaded quirts and all knives measuring six inches or more in overall length. Violation of this rule will result in arrest and jury trial by the Goldfork Miners' Law & Order Committee.

(Signed) JUBAL KERN,
Camp Marshal

"I'm posting another batch of these notices at once, Ristine," Kern said. "Enforcing this gun-toting law will cut down killings and street fights overnight."

Ristine handed the poster back to the marshal, hitching his own gun belts arrogantly as Kern pushed through the batwings to face the crowd on the porch outside.

"I'll be at my office in the jailhouse two hours before the sunset deadline, Ristine," the marshal said pointedly. "I'll expect you to drop around and check that hardware of yours or face the consequences. You might pass the word along to your customers."

Kern paused to pry a pair of rusty tacks from a bulletin board on the clapboard wall of the Jackpot, and tack his printed ultimatum thereon with the handle of his jackknife.

Then the marshal limped down the steps and pushed off through the crowd, acknowledging greetings of old friends with curt nods. The law had come back to Goldfork to stay.

Behind Kern, the throng crowded around the sign, educated miners in the forefront reading Kern's declaration of war against the camp's owlhoot element for the benefit of the illiterates.

"Why, Kern's as good as signed his own death warrant!" spoke up a bearded hardrock miner whose six-gun, strapped in plain sight outside his buffalo coat, had notches filed conspicuously on the backstrap. "I'm danged if I'll give up my hawgleg for no marshal, and to blazes with the Law an' Order Committee!"

A rumble of mixed comment followed the miner's outburst.

"Kern is sallin' for showdown — I agree with you there, Troll," vouchsafed Sol Kreidler, owner of the Okay Mercantile Store. "But as a charter member of the Committee, I'm telling you a gun-toting law is one thing this camp has got to have. I aim to check my forty-four with the marshal."

CALLING at the Wells-Fargo office, Jube Kern claimed his carpetbag from the agent. Then he headed up Nugget Street and turned in at the familiar brick building which the Miners' Law & Order Committee had built to serve as a jail. Kern's sleeping quarters were in a lean-to behind the calaboose.

Old memories stirred the marshal as he unlocked the door of his shanty. Nothing had been disturbed during his half-year's absence. The framed photograph of Vola Colton still stood on the table by his bunk, a cherished Christmas gift which he would have pawned his soul to have had with him at the hospital in 'Frisco to ease the monotony of his convalescence.

He stood staring at the girl's tintype likeness for a long minute, then inhaled deeply and tossed his carpetbag on the bunk.

Taking a ring of brass keys from his pocket, he unlocked the jail and gave the cell block and his office a leisurely inspection. Obviously, the building had not been opened during his absence—a fact which did not surprise him, inasmuch as he had left town with the only set of jail keys. On the other hand, the Committee could have had Saleratus Burke, the local locksmith, make a new set of keys if the camp had actually needed the jail. On the face of it, it would seem that Goldfork had no need for a bastille to house its wrongdoers, much less a marshal.

Leaving the jail with a bundle of printed placards and a tack hammer under his arm, Kern headed back to the main street and crossed over to Gideon Colton's Gold Exchange, a squat brick structure with barred windows and a corrugated iron roof. Colton's was the bank where miners weighed in their dust and nuggets and received currency or specie in exchange.

A girl wearing levis and a red wool shirt was waiting for him in the doorway of the Exchange. Seeing her there, exactly as he had remembered her last, Jube Kern knew he had returned at last to the fountainhead of strength which had given him the will to pull through after medicos in San Francisco had pronounced his case hopeless.

"It's me, Vola." The marshal grinned, halting at the doorstep. "I've lost twenty-thirty pounds of tallow and I've got some gray hairs and a steady limp. But I'm back, like I promised you I'd be last Thanksgiving."

Tears flooded Vola Colton's amber eyes as their hands touched, and then she was in his arms, her cheek pressed against the cold metal of the law badge on his mackinaw.

"It's been unendurable, Jube!" she whispered as their lips parted a little later. "Not being able to get out of these terrible mountains all winter, not being able to send or receive a letter, yet knowing you needed me so and wondering if you were alive or dead."

He held her at arm's length, reveling in the beauty of her clustering chestnut hair, watching the haunted look fade from her eyes for the first time in five months.

Not yet twenty, Gid Colton's daughter was a rarity in the Southern Mines, an unmarried girl in a land that was starved for feminine companionship, a girl who had pledged herself for eternity to a man the diggings said would never return.

"You shouldn't have done it, Jube," she said finally, when the first ecstasy of their reunion had spent itself.

Kern's brows arched quizzically.

"Done what—come back to the girl I aim to marry?" he chided, grinning down at her.

She blushed, taking a bandanna from her denim trousers and dabbing at her lashes.

"No—that coffin you shipped up here," she answered. "I didn't meet the stage because I couldn't have borne it if you hadn't been aboard, Jube. But when the driver unloaded that awful casket, and said you'd gone into Ristine's dive to get back your badge, I was cold with dread."

Gideon Colton interrupted them at the doorway then, a weather-beaten erect man of forty, with a distinguished gray imperial.

As they shook hands, Kern glanced past him and saw the black pine coffin he had purchased in San Francisco a week ago was now blocking the floor in front of the counter where Colton kept his gold scales.

"It goes without saying that I'm glad our prayers were answered and your health has been restored, son," the banker said gruffly. "But I thought you were more level-headed than to make good that crazy promise of yours to come back with a coffin for Happyjack Ristine, Jube. It ain't like you to pull a story-book stunt like that. You're practically inviting Ristine's gunmen to bushwhack you one of these nights."

Kern grinned, unperturbed by the banker's diatribe.

"You can't buy a box or a crate in 'Frisco for love or money these days, Gid," he said. "Wait till you see what's in that coffin. It's the only kind of a receptacle I could get hold of."

Vola Colton and her father stared curiously as Kern went behind the Gold Exchange counter and found Colton's toolbox in its accustomed place.

He returned with a short iron crowbar and proceeded to pry open the lid of the black coffin.

"Books!" exclaimed the girl, dropping on her knees beside the tightly-crammed casket. "No wonder it weighed like a ton of bricks."

CHAPTER III

Sundown Ultimatum

KERN set the coffin lid to one side and watched Vola run her fingers along a set of calfhide encyclopedia, then tug out a massive morocco-bound volume of Shakespeare from the hundreds of books which the coffin contained.

"Books from around the Horn—and they sold for a song down on the *Embarcadero,* like so much ballast," Jube Kern explained jubilantly. "Enough to set up a library for those who know how to read in these diggings, Vola."

The girl ran her fingers almost lovingly over the backs of novels and other reading matter which would be worth far more than their weight in gold up here in this isolated backwash of the Argonaut country.

"I can't thank you enough, Jube," she whispered. "These are the first books beside Dad's Bible that I've seen since we left Missouri in Forty-eight."

Gideon Colton blew his nose loudly, busy riffling the pages of a law tome by Blackstone.

"We'll stow these books in the fruit closet out in the kitchen for the time bein', honey," the banker said. "And then I aim to chop this coffin into kindlin' wood and let the whole town know what I did with it. Five gets you ten that Happyjack Ristine and his Jackpot cutthroats are plotting right now to lay your carcass out in this box inside of twenty-four hours."

The grin faded from the marshal's lips, as reality crowded in about him once more.

"As chairman of the Law and Order Committee, Gid," Kern said, "I reckon you still give your backing to a no gun-toting law for Goldfork?"

Colton fingered his white tuft of chin whiskers.

"You're talking true, son. We weren't able to hire a marshal with courage enough to wear the star you pinned onto that wooden Injun at Ristine's saloon. And I haven't tallied up how many killings this camp has seen during the winter—most of them drunken brawls that would have wound up as harmless fist fights if the drunks weren't toting shooting irons when they came to town."

Jube Kern shifted the package of placards under his arm.

"Things will be different after sundown tonight," he promised gravely. "Which reminds me—I got a little job of bill posting to do around this camp, here and now."

Gideon Colton went to the window, laced his hands behind his back and stared off at the crowded main street.

"You couldn't have chosen a worse night in the year to inaugurate your gun-totin' law, Jube," he commented. "Along with your stage, the first whisky this camp has seen in weeks arrived at the saloons. The gamblin' dens will play to sky-high stakes. The lid's off in Goldfork tonight. There'll be some new graves up the hillside tomorrow, I'm afraid."

Jube Kern paused with his hand on the doorknob, reading the anguish in Vola Colton's eyes. Everything in the girl cried out to halt the marshal, yet both of them knew she would not speak the sentiments which were so close to her heart.

"I couldn't have chosen a better night, Gid," the marshal insisted. "The time to clamp down the lid is before it gets a chance to blow off. Tomorrow would be too late."

Tension mounted in gulch-rimmed Goldfork as the coppery globe of the sun westered closer to the pine-grown skyline of the Sierra Nevadas, down-canyon below the camp.

There was whisky to be had in town tonight, ending a bar famine of over two months' duration. Whisky bred trouble, and trouble was a marshal's business. Goldfork had a marshal again. These two facts were carried by the grapevine to the uttermost cabin and mucker's tent on the up-creek placer claims.

Miners deserted their Long Toms and gold pans in the remote canyons for the first time in weeks and trooped to the gulch town to celebrate. On trees bordering every incoming trail to Goldfork, the miners passed printed posters notifying them of Marshal Jube Kern's gun-toting law, once more in effect in Goldfork.

SOME innate sense of sportsmanship, engendered by a vague admiration for Kern's return to a camp where sure death would be at his elbow every hour around the clock, prompted a goodly percentage of the incoming Argonauts to drop around by the jail on Nugget Street and surrender what knives and firearms they happened to be toting.

"You ain't going to consider this here Allen's Pepperbox of mine a deadly weapon, are you, marshal?" joshed Saleratus Burke the locksmith, turning in a six-barreled revolver which had enjoyed a plentiful sale to tenderfoots back East, heading for the gold fields of El Dorado.

Jube Kern scribbled off a receipt, tagged the Allen contraption and hung it on a wall nail.

"There's a circuit judge down Mariposa way who turned a murder suspect loose because he said it was impossible to kill or injure anybody with one of these Pepperboxes," Kern admitted, handing Burke his numbered ticket. "But we'll overlook his ruling, Saleratus. After all, it's just three pounds of iron to pack around in your jeans."

By the time the sun touched the crowns of the sugar pines on the gulch rimrocks, Kern's office resembled an arsenal, with weapons ranging from Sharps buffalo rifles to dull-edged Barlow knives hanging on the wall above his desk.

With the coming of sunset and the deadline of Kern's ultimatum, the marshal took care of the last-minute rush of business from the boasters and late arrivals who had decided not to defy the Committee's edict.

Dusk was running down the gulch when Jube Kern locked his jail office and headed for the Gold Exchange, where he had accepted an invitation to have supper with Vola and her father.

The young lawman ran a gauntlet of good-natured jibes during his saunter down the main street, but he took the hoo-rawing in the same spirit it was given. What counted was that he failed to spot a single miner wearing a gun belt or sheath knife in defiance of his posted order.

Sol Kreidler buttonholed Kern as he

passed the Okay Mercantile store.

"All this forty-rod likker coming to town will have the gutters flowin' red with blood by midnight, Jube," Kreidler said pessimistically. "I sort of wish you'd held off one more day, for your own safety."

Kern grinned, but his voice held no mirth.

"Other camps from Mariposa to Grass Valley have gun-toting laws and they enforce 'em, Sol. There's no reason why Goldfork can't do the same."

Ten minutes later, seated at table with Vola and old Gid, Kern heard the question he had been dreading.

"Have Ristine and Malone and his Jackpot crew turned in their artillery yet, son?"

Kern saw Vola's troubled eyes fixed on his face as he shook his head.

"Not yet. I'm hoping to find their hardware stacked on the jail steps after I finish supper, Gid."

"And if you don't?" Vola's voice held a harsh note of anxiety, the first hint of strain she had revealed all evening.

Jube Kern shrugged, pouring sorghum on one of Vola's fluffy soda biscuits.

"I reckon I know where Ristine can be found," he said. He turned to the Gold Exchange banker with a cheerful grin. "I see you've stacked those books in the fruit closet, Gid. I hope you won't make good on that josh about chopping my coffin into stovewood. It set me back two hundred bucks for that pine box, and I had to give up the silver handles that went with it."

Night had descended over Goldfork's tarpaper-roofed shacks when Kern, walking with a barely perceptible limp, made his way down the muddy street between the unpainted false fronts.

The makings of trouble were rife in Goldfork tonight. Besides the unprecedented influx of Yankee and Chinese miners, a contingent of Me-Yuk bucks and their squaws from a rancheree back in the hills had arrived, trying to swap furs for firewater.

LIGHTS glowed from the windows in Goldfork's twenty-odd saloons and gambling halls, with every establishment crowded with miners and buckskin-clad hunters eager to buck the tiger and get drunk.

Jangly music came from the Forty-Niner Dancehall, where booted muckers were square dancing with the painted jezebels who had arrived from Sonora and Jimtown that evening.

Arriving at the jail, Kern found a half-tipsy hostler from the Bigstrike Livery Barn waiting for him on the steps with a rusty-bladed bowie knife.

"Aim to obey the law," hiccoughed the stable boy. "Mighty glad you pulled through, Jube."

Kern grinned, noting that Ristine had not sent a swamper over from the Jackpot with his quota of firearms.

"Thanks, Jerry. It's mostly the out-of-town buckos I'm interested in dehorning. You can pick up this skinnin' knife in the morning, huh?"

The main stem was ominously deserted when Jube Kern arrived at the Jackpot Saloon and crossed the porch. He paused by the batwings to unbutton his wool mackinaw, then pushed inside.

A sudden hush congealed inside the barroom as the marshal stepped over beside the wooden figure of Helldorado Harry and stood surveying the crowded hall.

Zeno Malone, his albino hair and pink eyes accentuated by the snowy fabric of his bar apron, was busy setting up drinks to the rough-dressed customers lining the brass rail, eager to get their share of whisky before the limited supply ran out. Another freight wagon might not get up from the valley for weeks.

Whale-oil lamps guttered from ceiling beams under the mezzanine gallery. Sounds of revelry came from Ristine's private gaming rooms upstairs. The atmosphere was cloyed with tobacco smoke and the fumes of liquor and human sweat.

Then Kern spotted Happyjack Ristine.

The frock-coated gambler turned over his roulette wheel to a croupier and headed across the sawdust-sprinkled puncheon floor, his cheroot trailing a ribbon of blue smoke as he headed toward the marshal.

Lamplight refracted from a pair of pearl-handled Dragoon Colts, buckled ostentatiously on the outside of Ristine's fustian swallowtail coat.

"Howdy, Marshal." Ristine's purred greeting carried to the far ends of the barroom, arresting the attention of drinkers and card players alike. "Lookin' for somebody in particular?"

Kern balanced on the toes of his

boots, favoring his aching leg. He swung his mackinaw tails back to reveal his own thonged-down gun, his palms planted akimbo on his hips.

"Since when," he asked casually, "did you go in for packing guns in plain sight, Happyjack? I thought sleeve derringers were more your style."

Ristine shrugged, dragging a ruby finger down his coal-black sidewhiskers. Through the tail of his eye, Jube Kern saw two of the Jackpot's Mexican bouncers edging off to one side, ready to catch the lawman in a cross-fire if trouble developed.

"A gentleman can change his mind," Ristine grunted, savoring the tension of the moment. "Like I told you, a man carries his law on his hip here in Goldfork."

Kern shook his head, his sidewise stare halting the pair of Mexicans in their sidling progress toward the left end of the bar counter.

"Uh-uh, Happyjack. That was when this camp didn't have a duly-appointed marshal to keep the peace."

Ristine paused in front of the lawman, the ruby coal on the tip end of his cheroot ebbing and glowing as he sucked the weed. Kern had not budged from his steps, his back to Helldorado Harry, his eyes commanding every angle of the barroom.

"Is that what you come into my place to tell me, Marshal?" goaded the gambler, his voice raspy with veiled menace. "Isn't my house keeping itself under control enough to suit you?"

Kern fanned a burst of cheroot smoke away from his eyes with his left hand.

"There's no gun-toting in town after sundown tonight," he reminded Ristine calmly. 'Or had you forgotten?"

FEW in the barroom saw what happened next.

One instant, Jube Kern's right hand was at ease on his hip, splayed fingers holding back the heavy folds of his mackinaw. The next, his cedar-stocked Dragoon was in his fist, thumb earing the knurled hammer back at full cock, the muzzle end reamed sight-deep into Ristine's fancy vest where a gold-nugget watch chain hung in bright nodes between his pockets.

"You're under arrest for illegal possession of firearms, Ristine!" Kern's voice was pitched low but it carried the impact of a thunderclap. "I'm jailing you for the night. The Miners' Law and Order Committee will hear your case in open trial first thing in the morning."

Ristine did not change expression by so much as a flutter of an eyelid. He shrugged, lifting both hands to the level of his head.

"I'm your prisoner, Marshal," he said mockingly. "Lead the way. I don't argue with a gun prodding my middle button."

Kern's eyes darted over the barroom crowd, jelled in a stunned tableau behind the gambler. He reached out with his free hand and took over Ristine's brace of .45s, slipping them into the roomy pocket of his mackinaw.

Then he backed out through the slatted batwings into the night, Ristine following with arms raised.

No words passed between the men as Ristine set off in the direction of Nugget Street. Kern kept to the middle of the street, away from the lamplighted gutters, crowding his prisoner close to block any attempt of a drygulcher opening fire from the black alleys flanking the street.

Two minutes later the marshal was checking the lock of a jail cell, after frisking the gambler and producing a .41 hideout derringer in a spring-clip holster under Ristine's left cuff.

"You'll find blankets and a pitcher of water there," Kern said brusquely. "You honed to make a test case out of this? It's lucky your barroom gunhawks didn't grab for leather."

Ristine's lips held a mocking grin in the glare of the jail lantern, the lattice-work bars falling in a check pattern across the narrow planes of his face.

"My men wouldn't think of defying the law, Kern," Ristine said with oily sarcasm. "Especially as long as I was in the line of fire."

NEXT ISSUE: TOMBSTONE AND SPEEDY IN
BANDIT BUSTERS OF WAR DANCE
An Exciting Complete Novel by W. C. TUTTLE

CHAPTER IV

Bait for a Death Trap

GRIMLY Kern locked the cell-block door and blew out his office lamp. His face held worried lines as he stepped out of the jail building, putting the wall to his back while he probed the shadows around him.

Things had gone too easy. It was as if Ristine had anticipated his arrest, had baited Kern into carrying through his bluff. There was hidden menace in the casual acceptance with which Ristine had responded to his arrest over in the Jackpot.

Reaching the plank boardwalk on the main street, Kern paused indecisively.

Other men in the Jackpot Saloon, including the albino Malone and his Mexican bouncers, were packing guns in plain sight. But Jube Kern was a patient and careful man. Cleaning out a nest of lawbreakers in a hostile saloon would be suicidal for one man, and Kern had no intention of enlisting the members of Gideon Colton's Committee to back his play tonight. He would tame the camp on a lone-wolf basis or not at all.

Tomorrow, a miners' jury would condemn Ristine to banishment from Goldfork, give him twenty-four hours to wind up his business affairs and leave the diggings, as an accessory to most of the crimes committed in the camp to date.

Once they were without a leader, Zeno Malone and the other hoodlums would fall into line.

Having made his decision, Jube Kern headed for the Gold Exchange. Vola Colton had seen her man leave this night with little hope of his return.

There was plenty of time between now and midnight to make his routine rounds of the other saloons in town and to check up on the Me-Yuks camped down by the creek.

Bartender Zeno Malone took advantage of the excitement which seized the Jackpot barroom following Ristine's arrest, to slip into the storeroom behind the bar where he kept his barreled liquor.

Shedding his bar apron, the albino donned a flat-crowned hat and stepped out into the night through a back door.

He crossed a vacant lot behind Sol Kreidler's mercantile store and followed an alley to Bonanza Street. Waiting for him there was the buffalo-coated figure of Saleratus Burke, a grizzled Irishman who had found placer mining too tough for a man of his eighty-odd years and who had opened a locksmith and tinware shop on the side street.

Without speaking, the two moved by prearranged plan to Burke's sod-roofed clapboard shanty at the intersection of the main street. The old locksmith made sure his window blinds were drawn before lighting the wick of his whale-oil lamp.

"Seems Kern took the only jail keys with him when he went below last fall." The old Irishman chuckled as he moved over to his workbench and hauled open a drawer. "When Gid Colton got me to fit new keys to the calaboose last Christmas, I figgered a duplicate set might come in handy some time."

The bartender's albino-pink eyes flashed with suppressed excitement as he watched the old artisan fish in his junk drawer and exhume a ring of shiny new keys from their hiding place.

"Happyjack will pay you off with a poke of dust big enough to choke a jenny ass, Saleratus," the bartender grunted, thrusting the keys in a pocket of his linsey-woolsey shirt. "You better head back to the Jackpot and act like nothing happened. After the smoke settles tonight somebody on the Committee might put two an' two together and start asking questions about the way Ristine broke jail so easy."

Saleratus spat a gobbet of tobacco juice at the wick of the whaleoil lamp and extinguished it. He followed the barkeep outdoors.

"Reckon you'll need any help?" he asked hopefully. "Just for the looks of it, I checked my old Allen's Pepperbox with the marshal this evenin'. But I still got my cap-an'-ball pistol loaded for business."

Burke shook his head.

"Ristine and me can punch Kern's ticket without extry help, thanks."

Leaving Burke's shanty, Malone cut wide up the logged-off slope which had provided the whipsaw lumber for Goldfork's housing needs, skirted the new stampmill which the quartz mining syn-

dicate was building and dropped down the mountainside toward the jail on Nugget Street.

He paused in the shadow of an ailanthus thicket near the jail yard, checking the loads in his own guns and scouting the lay of the land before emerging into the open. The marshal's office and lean-to living quarters were dark. A light burned in the cell block proper where Ristine was incarcerated.

MALONE made an exploratory circuit of the jail building before presenting himself at the marshal's office door. His cautious knock brought no response. Kern was out.

Selecting a key from the set which Saleratus Burke had fabricated for the Committee last winter, Malone unlocked the door and stepped into Kern's office. Guided to the cell block door by the shaft of light at the threshold, Zeno Malone squinted through the big keyhole to make sure Ristine was the only prisoner inside the jail at the moment, and then unlocked the inner door.

Happyjack Ristine got up from his cell cot but showed no other reaction to his henchman's arrival as the snow-haired bartender tested keys in the cell lock until he found the proper one. A moment later Ristine was walking into Kern's office.

"Keep the key ring," Ristine whispered, fumbling among the guns hanging from wall pegs until he discovered his own pair of pearl-handled Dragoons. "No use implicating old Saleratus. We can toss 'em in the creek later."

Holstering his guns, Ristine led the way out into the night. They paused in the clotted shadow by the brick wall, listening to the tinpanny dance music from the Forty Niner wafting across the spring night.

"Kern may be makin' his rounds," Malone suggested. "Shall we wait here?"

A scowl was forming between Ristine's brows as he stared off through the night in the direction of the Gold Exchange.

"I saw the marshal head direct for Colton's," he grunted. "That's as good a place as any for a showdown with that son."

Malone started to say something, then thought better of it. Of all the men who had attempted to court Vola Colton, Happyjack Ristine had been most sensitive to the girl's rebuffs. It was another score Ristine had to settle against the young marshal of Goldfork before this night was much older. A score that came very close to being the motive for Ristine's deep-rooted hatred for Jubal Kern.

They crossed the main street and approached the Gold Exchange through a corner lot that was overgrown with a jungle of wild raspberry bushes. From the concealment of the dense brambles they saw that the front office of the Exchange was dark, shutters drawn behind its formidable iron-barred windows.

Old Gideon and his daughter had lived in the back rooms of the Gold Exchange ever since Mrs. Colton had died in the smallpox epidemic which had swept the Southern Mines in Eighteen-Fifty. Skirting the side wall, the two conspirators saw lamplight glowing through pinholes in the green window shades of the Colton kitchen.

Muted conversation reached their ears as Ristine and Malone left the shelter of the raspberry thicket and stalked to the kitchen wall. Through the clapboards they heard Vola Colton's melodious laugh, a sound which brought hot blood rushing to Ristine's cheeks. Vola had never laughed like that when he was paying court to her.

"I figure the days of placer mining are about done for around this gulch, Gid." It was Jube Kern's voice. "The big combines will take over the quartz mines, and your business will die along with the jackleg muckers on their two-bit claims. Have you decided to stay in California or—

The voices faded as Ristine and the albino bartender made their way around the rear corner of the building. A streak of light from a Chinese josshouse across the alley guided them to the kitchen door.

Ristine muttered an impatient oath as he tested the latch and found the door fastened on the inside.

"You drop back and cover the kitchen window in case the marshal tries to make a break, Zeno," whispered the saloonman. "He can't get out through the front office. Colton keeps the Exchange locked up nights like a bank."

Malone slipped around the corner of the building to carry out his chief's order. Ristine waited for two minutes, drawing in a deep breath and holding it

to steady the tom-tomming pulse which pounded in his eardrums.

His right hand was useless, a fact Ristine had difficulty in adjusting himself to. He transferred a gun to his left hand and drew back, lunging against the flimsy door with his shoulder.

The pot-metal latch shattered and Ristine smashed his way onto the back porch.

Inside the kitchen he heard a sudden startled hush, followed by a scuffle of boots and excited whisperings.

A QUICK leap carried Ristine to the kitchen door opening off the porch. He fumbled at the knob with his numb right hand, felt the door butt solidly against a bar on the inside.

"What is it?" came Gideon Colton's bellow. "Who's there?"

Ristine stepped back, gun leveled.

"Tell that marshal to come out with his hands raised, Gid!" the gambler rasped out. "The place is surrounded."

There was a moment of tense whispering inside the kitchen. Then Vola Colton spoke up timorously:

"Jube Kern—isn't here!"

With a cold laugh, the saloonman squeezed trigger to send a .45 slug hammering into the door lock. It shattered, but the inner bar held.

There was a jangle of glass inside the kitchen, proof that Zeno Malone had knocked out the pane with his gun barrel.

With savage impatience, Happyjack Ristine hurled himself at the kitchen door, felt the hickory bar rip out of its socket. He recovered his balance and leaped back into the porch shadows as the door slammed open, revealing Gideon Colton and his daughter standing side by side by the kitchen stove.

Ristine saw no trace of the marshal inside the kitchen. That could mean but one thing: Jube Kern must be waiting against the back wall, out of range of his vision. Or perhaps he had leaped into the adjoining parlor?

"Walk on in, Boss!" came Malone's triumphant yell from behind the smashed-out window. "The marshal ducked into that closet behind the stove yonder! He's a dead pigeon!"

Vola gave a low cry of horror as Ristine, crouched low, slipped through the door and moved quickly to one side in case the hidden lawman attempted a blind shot through the door of the fruit closet.

The saloonman's gun covered Colton and his daughter, the muzzle weaving from target to target like a snake's head. Both of the Coltons had gone bone-white, their eyes straying automatically to the flimsy wallpaper-covered door masking the entrance to a storage closet beside the stove.

"Come on in, Zeno!" Ristine called to his accomplice outside the window, moving to put the Coltons between himself and the closet door where Jube Kern crouched in hiding. "Don't budge an inch, you two."

Gideon Colton's craggy face mottled with anger as he stared at the weaving bore of Ristine's pistol. Vola recoiled involuntarily as Zeno Malone stalked in from the back door, twin six-guns jutting from waist level. The albino's rabbit eyes glowed in the lampshine.

"Take Vola and the old man into the sitting room, Zeno," Ristine ordered, his voice a harsh whisper. "I don't want anybody in the way when I settle Kern's account!"

CHAPTER V

Jube Kern's Coffin

AT GUN'S point, the Gold Exchange banker and the girl stumbled through an adjoining doorway into the parlor, Zeno Malone stalking behind them.

"All right," Ristine panted, swinging his eyes to the closet door. "Come out of that closet, marshal. Backwards. Stay put and I'll smoke you out!"

Jube Kern's muffled voice sounded from the cramped confines of the fruit closet:

"Go to blazes, Ristine. I'm not ready for suicide yet awhile."

A lethal grin relaxed Ristine's mouth. This would be rare sport. Judging from the size of the closet door, Jube Kern's bulky frame must be cramped double in the tiny cubicle behind the paper-covered boards, without so much as a crack through which to sight his own guns.

It was a death-trap made to order.

"It's your hide, Kern!"

From the living room, Vola Colton gave a sharp cry as she saw Ristine level his six-gun at the closet door. The gun spat flame and bucked in Ristine's grasp, the slug punching a slot through the dead center of the square door.

As if seized with a nameless insanity Ristine tripped his gunhammer five times as rapidly as he could ear back the prong, shooting a loose pattern of bullet holes through the flimsy pine boards.

Then, pouching the empty Dragoon, Ristine reached across to his second Colt and emptied it, spacing the slugs evenly over the four quarters of the door, riddling the thin boards high and low and in the center.

A sagging weight caused the door to bulge against its latch. Through bouncing layers of milky gunsmoke, Ristine stared across the kitchen, eyes drawn in fatal fascination to a rivulet of crimson fluid which leaked under the door and spread in an ever-widening pool across the floor boards.

The frenzied laughter of a madman burst from Happyjack Ristine's lips as he reloaded his Dragoons with powder and shot and percussion and fired another dozen slugs into the perforated panels of the closet where Jube Kern had been crazy enough to take concealment.

The bright red puddle spread its telltale mirror under the door as Ristine emptied his last gun chamber and thrust hot-bored Colts into leather.

Then he crossed the smoky kitchen in three strides and jerked the doorknob of the closet, only to find that Jube Kern had locked the cabinet from the inside.

"Fetch Gid and the girl back in here, Zeno!" the gambler called out, his voice shaky from the reaction of his throbbing nerves. "I want 'em to see the carcass I've got for that coffin Jube Kern shipped up here this morning."

Vola Colton appeared in the living room doorway, her eyes swinging toward the bullet-riddled closet. She clutched her father's arm for support as Zeno Malone ushered them to the far corner of the room, opposite the closet.

Then Vola sighted the red puddle seeping under the door, and she sagged fainting on Gideon's supporting arm.

"I didn't have anything ag'in you, Gideon," Ristine panted, mopping his sweat-rinsed face with a fustian sleeve. "Not even when you organized your Committee with the idea of locking up my saloon and running me out of Goldfork. But you've seen too much tonight for me to risk letting you live."

Colton carried the inert body of his daughter to a chair by the kitchen table, Zeno Malone circling to keep them under the menace of his guns.

"Don't get tender-hearted notions about sparin' the filly, Boss!" the albino spoke up warningly. "She seen and heard as much as the old man. She'll hate your hide worse than ever for cashing in Kern's chips. I'll fix her if you've lost your nerve."

Ristine stalked over to the table, his eyes riveted on Vola Colton's marble-white face, her body held in Gideon's sheltering embrace.

"And to think I loved that girl—would have offered her diamonds and fine feathers and travel and everything a woman's heart could desire—"

COLTON'S oath interrupted Ristine's half-whispered revery.

"Go ahead!" panted the banker frantically. "Shoot and be hanged to you, Ristine. You'll be strung to the highest cottonwood limb in the gulch when Goldfork finds out you've murdered a woman in cold blood."

Ristine's fingers coiled about his gun stocks, half lifted the fancy Dragoons from leather. Then he turned to Zeno Malone, his face drawn into a malevolent mask.

"My irons are empty," he said huskily, extending his hand. "Give me one of yours."

Malone's bloodless lips pealed back from his teeth as he passed one of his Colts butt-first to Ristine. The saloonkeeper cocked the weapon, hitching his shoulders as if bracing himself for the nasty chore that faced him.

"Hold it or I'll riddle you, Ristine!"

The voice came from the opposite corner of the room. Like puppets jerked by a common wire, Zeno Malone and Happyjack Ristine whirled to stare at the apparition which was emerging from behind the opening door of the closet beyond the stove.

Marshal Jube Kern, crouched low to avoid an overhead shelf laden with jars of canned fruit, was emerging from the

storage closet, a cocked gun in either fist, the lamplight gleaming from the law badge on his mackinaw.

Kern stepped over a barricade of stacked-up, bullet-riddled books inside the closet door and drew up to his full height facing the bayed pair.

With a hoarse bawl of superstitious terror, Zeno Malone snapped the grip of the trance which froze his muscles and dropped his gun to the floor, babbling incoherently as he raised his arms before the marshal's drop.

Staring through the gunsmoke at the reincarnation of the foe he had blasted into eternity a moment before, Happyjack Ristine raised his gun and tripped the hammer.

The saloonman's bullet, aimed in panic, crashed into a stove-lid wide to the marshal's left. Before he could cut down for a second shot, Kern opened up with both Colts roaring in unison.

Ristine's frock-coated torso jolted under the impact of converging lead, but he clung to his nerve and even as he sagged to one knee, he lifted his gun once more.

With cold precision, firing alternately with left and right guns, the marshal of Goldfork drilled his point-blank hail of slugs into Ristine's toppling frame. The gambler's Colt exploded once, to drive a shot into the floor at his feet.

Then, with blood spurting through his black Dundrearies and blemishing the front of his flowered waistcoat, the gunboss of Goldfork pitched face downward on the floor and lay still under a swaying umbrella of gunpowder fumes.

Vola Colton opened her eyes in time to see her father emerging from the Gold Exchange office, where he had carried Happyjack Ristine's mortal remains to the black pine coffin Kern had brought from San Francisco.

Zeno Malone, handcuffed to a table leg across the room, watched the banker's return with dull despair glazing his rabbit-like orbs. Gideon Colton would be the presiding judge at the Miners' court which would mete out justice to the albino on the morrow, and already the feel of hang-rope was a tangible thing on the bartender's ivory-skinned throat.

Then Vola Colton became aware of the fact that her head was cradled in Jube Kern's lap.

"Jube—how—how—"

Her eyes left his to stray to the pile of books stacked in jumbled disarray inside the open closet.

"Do you think I'd have ducked into that closet if I hadn't been sure it wasn't a death trap, Vola?" the marshal chuckled, smoothing a stray curl off her damp forehead. "I hunkered down behind that double row of books you stored there."

"But," protested the girl, "I don't understand."

"Even a buffalo gun can't shoot a slug through twenty-four inches of solid paper, Vola. Even a two-inch book will turn a forty-five slug, let alone a barricade two feet thick. It was like being behind a stone wall."

THE girl struggled to her feet, staring at the blood-red puddle which had leaked out of the closet.

"But I saw blood."

It was Gideon Colton who supplied the answer to that one. Returning from his examination of the lead-punched pile of the encyclopedia which had shielded Jube Kern from Ristine's fusillade, the banker carried with him a smashed jar from the upper shelf of the closet.

"A quart of that wild raspberry juice you canned last year, Vola," Colton chuckled. "Smashed to smithereens. And made a mess of that volume of Shakespeare you was so glad to get."

The banker set the shattered fragment of the raspberry jar on the kitchen stove, and wiped the red stains from his fingers. Then he turned to the cowering Zeno Malone.

"While I'm takin' you over to the jailhouse, Zeno," he told the bartender, "you can tell me how you engineered that jailbreak for your boss. I got a hunch Saleratus Burke won't linger around these diggin's much longer."

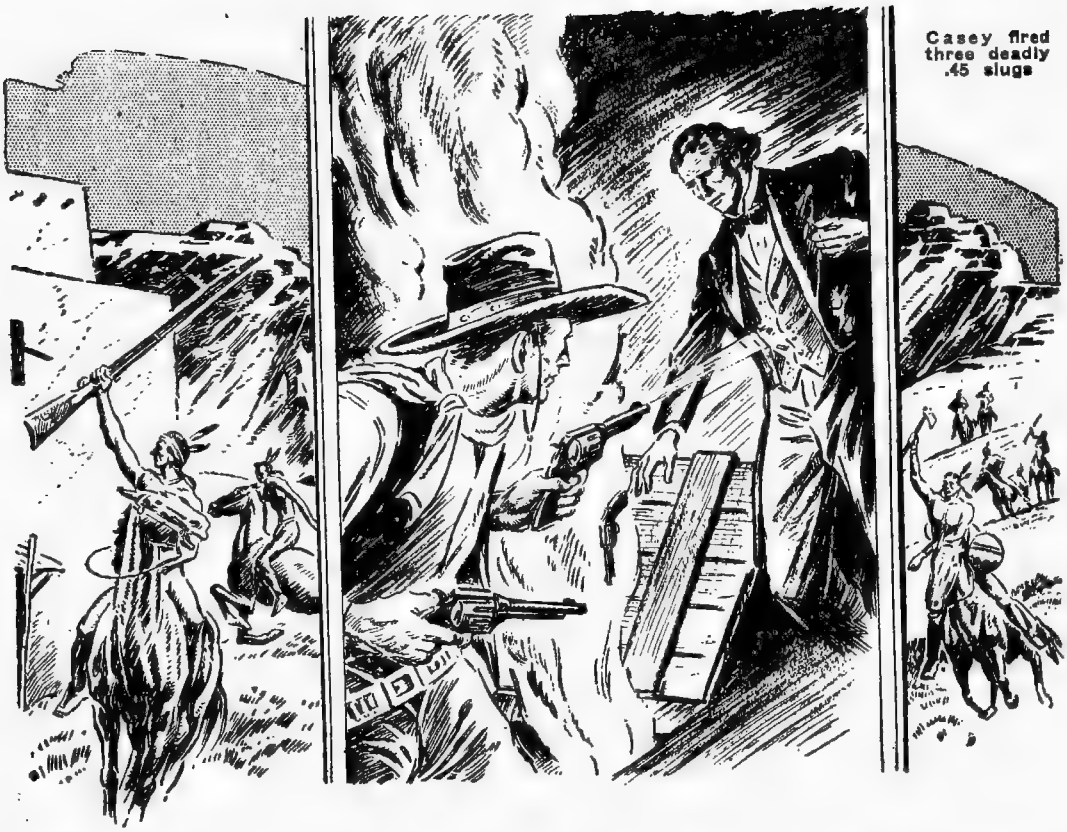
Unlocking the albino's wrist irons with Kern's key, Gideon Colton turned his twinkling gaze at the marshal and his daughter.

"You two got plenty to talk over without Malone and me eavesdropping," he said with a grin. "I reckon Goldfork will tame down considerable when I go over to the Jackpot and tell those Mexican swampers to call for their boss. It ain't every gun-boss who gets planted in a two-hundred-dollar coffin, eh Malone?"

Next Issue: SQUARE M TROUBLE, a Novelet by TOM CURRY

The Apaches circled the ranch buildings, yelping and firing

A SWIFT-MOVING COMPLETE ACTION NOVELET



THE INDIAN RING

By JOSEPH CHADWICK

His ranch the target of Apache raiders, Jim Casey puts up a rousing battle—and challenges the evil power of the El Garito gun runners who supply arms to hostile tribesmen!

CHAPTER I

Apache Raid

WITH his range reaching to the edge of the Barrens, outlaw and Apache country, Jim Casey had no protection from the Law and little from the Army. When the need arose, he and his three hired hands, as tough a quartet as could be found in the Territory, took it on themselves to defend the stretch of rock and cactus, bunchgrass and catclaw Casey used for a range. Rustlers tested his defenses once or twice, to their sorrow, then hunted softer nuts to crack. The Apaches, however, were a hardier breed. Every band that jumped the reservation paid Casey a visit.

Perhaps Casey's spread just happened to be handy, being so close to the wild Barrens. Or it may have been that the 'Paches had a taste for his beef and a liking for his broncs. Whatever the reason, they came often. At Casey's, powder and lead were big items when expenses were tallied.

Other ranchers claimed Casey was a fool for having settled in such a location, and he was a stubborn man. If he'd been taken by a notion to run cattle on the off-side of Hell, he'd probably have done it. But his Irish good humor, in-

herited from his father who'd come from the Old Sod, gradually turned sour. His temper grew short.

"Boys," he finally told his crew, "I'm going to do something about it."

That was the day a marauding band all but wiped out the ranch. . . .

The Apaches came from the north, out of the rocky wastes of the Barrens. It was a bigger band than usual, numbering nearly forty warriors. Casey was in a corral halter-breaking a paint mustang when he saw a growing smudge of dust out across the desert. The traveling dust cloud was warning enough. Casey fired three shots into the air, and his punchers out on the range at a branding fire, knew the signal. They came tearing in from the south, but for a moment or two it seemed they wouldn't make it.

The race was close. Never ones to save horseflesh, the Apaches were riding hard. Casey had armed himself with a Winchester, and, as the drumming of hoofs turned to thunder, he opened fire. His shots didn't slow the raiders, but spread them out—and they came on like a tidal wave. He emptied his rifle without making a hit, but by then his crew—Pablo, young Andy Ketch, old Pete Lawe—had won the race. They reined in blowing broncs, spilled from the saddle, grabbed out their six-guns.

"Inside!" Casey yelled. "Fast!"

They forted up in the ranchhouse, barring and barricading the only door as the Apaches came swirling up. The ranchhouse had been built for just such a purpose. Its walls were of 'dobe, and nearly two feet thick. Its only windows were narrow apertures. One man to a side, the crew settled down to what threatened to be a long fight. Casey fired from his opening, using the Winchester, and saw, on his third shot, one of the swarming raiders go down.

IT WAS bedlam, a nightmare. The Apaches circled the ranch buildings, yelling, firing. A yellow-white curtain of dust shrouded them. Their ponies were mostly half-tamed mustangs. The riders were naked except for one or two who wore white man's shirts—a breechclout, boot-like moccasins, a red head band, and maybe a bandolier of cartridges. Such things served the Apache for clothing.

Firing steadily, Casey could see the gleaming bodies and dusky faces. A heaviness grew in him. It was not fear, for long ago Jim Casey had convinced himself that, one way or another, a man could die only once. But if it was not fear in him, it was hopelessness. Casey's ranch was having one raid too many.

Firing from his loophole, Pablo was swearing softly in Spanish. At the rear wall, tow-headed young Andy Ketch shouted with every shot. Old Pete Lawe was silent as he emptied his six-gun through a slit in the barred door. The ranchhouse grew hot as an oven, and so thick with powder-smoke the four defenders began to cough. The din rose to a weird crescendo of hellish sound, then Old Pete's voice cut through it:

"I'm hit—bad!"

Casey swung around, took a step toward the old-timer. Then he halted and swore, knowing by the way Pete folded as he collapsed that nothing could be done. Pete Lawe was dead.

It almost seemed that the Apaches had come for that purpose—to rob old Pete of his life. For the yelling and firing outside suddenly let up, and when Casey turned back to his loophole he saw the raiders riding off. The sudden quiet was jarring.

"What ails them?" Andy Ketch muttered. "They had us boxed."

"Ees a trick, maybe," Pablo said. "*Si*, a trick!"

Casey didn't say anything at once. He sagged against the wall, rolled and lighted a smoke. He looked at Pete Lawe's crumpled body, and he looked away. He was a lean six-footer, with a dark and rocky, but not unhandsome face. He was thirty-one years old, and he'd bought his ranch with sweat and sacrifice. A high enough price, Casey now told himself, without it having cost Old Pete's life. It was then, as he waited to see if the Apaches had really gone or were up to some trick, that Jim Casey made up his mind. And said:

"Boys, I'm going to do something about it."

"*Si*, Jeem," Pablo said, "But what?"

"Ain't nothing a hombre can do about Apaches," Andy Ketch said.

"I'm not talking about the Apaches," Casey said flatly, "but the reason for their raiding. I'm going to do something about that."

The Mexican and the tow-headed cow-

poke exchanged a glance. They didn't know what Casey meant.

"I hear riders—*la caballeria!*" Pablo whispered. Both he and Andy turned to peer from their loopholes.

"That's right—cavalry," Andy said. "Now I savvy why those 'Pache devils high-tailed it. They knew the yellow-legs were coming!" He crossed the room, told Pablo to give him a hand with Pete Lawe's body. They lifted the dead man onto the bunk he'd slept in for more than a year. Andy then unbarred the door and went out, his voice lifted in a greeting to the oncoming troopers. Pablo followed him. And Jim Casey, after covering Old Pete with a blanket, went after them.

It was a troop of cavalry from Camp Sand, forty bay-mounted soldiers under Captain Len Barrett. A dozen civilians rode with the small blue-clad column, adding noise and confusion to the military orderliness. The troopers halted and kept their ranks under a quietly spoken order, but the civilians, a motley crew coming from El Garito, near the Army post, milled around and asked loud questions.

This posse was led by Frank Averill, a burly man of thirty-five who wore, along with his townsman's clothes, an air of authority. Jim Casey knew Averill well, for five years before, for a brief period, they had been partners in a freighting business with an office and wagonyard at Tucson.

Casey nodded.

"Howdy, Frank," he said. "You chasing Apaches nowadays?"

"Some of the boys were dead sot on forming a posse."

"And you came along for the ride?"

"I came along to see that they didn't run wild."

"There must be a profit in it, you taking a hand," Casey said sourly, and saw Averill's heavy face grow dull red. "Well, you won't catch that band by sitting here. They've dusted."

CAPTAIN BARRETT rode up, dismounted.

"How many, Casey?"

"Forty, I'd say."

"I see they left five dead behind."

"We must have fired two, three hundred shots," Casey said. "Not good shooting. They'd have had us, if you hadn't scared them off. They got Pete Lawe."

"Too bad," the officer said. He was a pudgy man past the forty mark, and he looked tired—tired of the Apaches, of the desert, of the Army. His voice had no color. "They jumped the reservation early yesterday morning, after killing Judd Brant. They must have holed up in the Barrens during the night."

"Why'd they kill Brant?" Casey said.

Barrett shrugged. "Why didn't they kill Brant long ago? He was as crooked an agent as ever was set up as a little tin-god by the Indian Bureau. He was using the San Marco Agency to make himself rich. The Apaches knew it. They got too much of him—at last."

"Why does the Army let such men as Brant get away with it, Captain?"

"The Army is one thing, the Indian Bureau another," Barrett said. He turned to his bay and mounted, then gave Casey a thin smile. "A soldier isn't supposed to reason why, friend. Say, why don't you pull up stakes and find a safer range?"

HE DIDN'T wait for an answer. With upraised arm, he led his little command out. The troopers headed southeast, in the direction the fast-moving Apaches had taken, and the rattle of their sabers and jingle of their accoutrements made a pleasant music. The civilians rode after them.

"One moment, Frank," Casey said.

Frank Averill reined in. He still had a sullen look, and his dark eyes were wary.

"What's on your mind, Jim?"

"Brant was a friend of yours, wasn't he?"

"I played cards and drank with him—on occasion."

"He wasn't the only man getting rich because of the Apaches," Casey said. "You know, Frank, this might be the beginning of the end. Maybe a lot of Brant's friends had better get from under while there's still time. That's a friendly warning, Frank. S'long. Good hunting."

He stepped back. Frank Averill rode off, his face dark with anger and bewilderment. Casey turned to Pablo and Andy Ketch.

"We'll bury Pete," he said. "Then I've got some riding to do."

CHAPTER II

Gun Runner

THEY marked Pete Lawe's grave with a cairn, and then there was nothing more they could do for him. For a moment, afterward, the three of them stood there with heads bared and bowed—and each silent with his own thoughts. Then Pablo crossed himself, and young Andy muttered, "Well, Pete's gone."

"But not forgotten," Jim Casey said.

They turned away, Casey to the corral where he roped a gelded dun for his saddle and a little gray mare for his pack. The other two men perched atop the fence, smoked and watched. Casey packed grub enough for a week. He packed a skillet and a coffee pot, matches, an axe, a box of cartridges for his rifle. He made up his bedroll, tied it to the cantle of his saddle. He went back to the bunkhouse for his razor and some soap. Ready now, he paused to take a quick look around. He mounted the dun, caught up the mare's halter rope.

"Boys, I don't know when I'll be back," he said, as though suddenly remembering them. He dug into the pocket of his brush jacket. "Payday was last Saturday, so we're about even. But here's your wages for this month."

He handed each man his money.

"That means you can pull out, if you want," he went on. "I wouldn't ask the devil himself to stay on here, after a raid like that one this morning. There'll be no hard feelings, if you ride out."

"Shucks, Boss, you're coming back, ain't you?" Andy asked.

"Sure, kid."

"Then we'll stay. Won't we, Pablo?"

The Mexican flashed a gleaming smile. "*Si!*" he said. "We'll be here when you get back, Jeem."

Casey nodded and smiled, touched by their loyalty. Then, sobering, he said:

"If I shouldn't get back in—say, two weeks, you'll know I ended up with a bullet in my back. In that case, round up the cattle and our saddle stock. Drive them to El Garito and sell for what you can get—and the money's yours. Well, that's it. S'long."

He headed out, swinging north—toward the Barrens.

For two days Jim Casey prowled the *malpais* without finding what he sought. He saw little evidence of other men in that emptiness. Once he came upon the ashes of a campfire that had been cold for days, and another time he found, near a waterhole, an empty whisky bottle. At sundown of the second day, he sighted smoke. He took cover until dark, then prowled through the rocks until he could see the people around the campfire. They were Indians—three men and a squaw, but not Apaches. Casey did not know what kind of Indians they were. He silently withdrew.

The third morning, however, his luck changed. After eating and breaking camp, he headed east and a mile's ride brought him to the tracks of a wagon and team. Casey's wide mouth formed a twisted smile. He followed the tracks. They were not very old.

The trail continued east, toward the Morada Mountains, beyond which lay the San Marco Indian Reservation. Pushing his horses, Casey brought the outfit into sight when it was less than five miles short of the Moradas. It was crawling along, the men with it apparently in no hurry. There were two of them, Casey saw, as he shortened the distance. He tied the pack mare's lead rope to his saddle horn, then drew his Winchester from its boot. And by then, he was seen.

One of the men dropped down from the wagon as the other reined in the team. The man on the ground kept his hand on his holstered gun as Casey rode up and halted. He was a half-breed known as Peso, and he had pale blue eyes that were an odd contrast to the darkness of his face. He had a reputation as being a cold-blooded killer. Casey glanced at the man on the wagon seat, a tremendously fat man with a flabby red face—Big Weber. Casey looked back at the breed, the more dangerous of the two, but he spoke to the fat man.

"Heading for the Moradas, Weber?"

"Maybe."

"That's pretty close to the Apache reservation."

"Is it?" Big Weber said. "Shucks, the

Apaches don't bother me."

"No, I reckon not—so long as you run whisky and guns to them."

"Who says I do that?" Big Weber asked, his voice still easy but his eyes turning ugly. "The Apaches buy other kinds of trade goods."

"You're taking a long way around to sell lawful trade goods, Weber," Casey said. "You mind if I look inside your wagon?"

"I don't," Weber said, "but Peso does. Eh, Peso?"

"Sure, Boss," the breed said. "I wouldn't like it."

"What's it to you, Peso?" Casey asked. "You're just the hired man. Weber brings you along because he can't savvy Apache talk. Keep out of it, Peso. I'm after Big Weber, and nothing's going to stop me from getting him—good. He's been making a trip through the Barrens every month, and I want to know for sure what he's hauling."

"Let him take a look," Weber said. "It'll do him no good."

CASEY shot a look at the fat man, knowing there was a trick in this abrupt back-down. But Weber's heavy face was unreadable. Casey looked back at Peso. The breed had taken his hand away from his six-gun. It looked all right—almost. Casey gigged his dun over to the wagon. He tied his reins together, then used his left hand to grab hold of the tarpaulin covering the trade goods.

"Now, Peso!" Big Weber said.

Casey had expected something like this. He let go of the tarp, flung up his rifle just as Peso made his draw. Rife and six-gun blasted together, and Peso uttered a strangling cry. The breed leaned forward, leaned so far forward he lost his balance. He fell on his face and didn't move again. Big Weber swore and lifted his arms, showing empty hands. Beads of sweat stood out on his face.

"I didn't figure you could do it, Casey," he said thickly. "No man ever took Peso before."

Casey gestured with the rifle. "Get out your pocket gun, Weber—easy-like. That's it. Now throw it back over your shoulder."

When that was done, Casey pulled back the wagon tarp. Big Weber was hauling supplies and camp gear, including a shovel which Casey threw to the ground.

"Dig, Weber," he said. "You owe it to Peso to bury him." He took the axe from the mare's pack and climbed onto the wagon.

With a few quick blows, he broke open the cases of "trade goods." One case held a dozen Winchester rifles, two others contained cartridges. The two barrels he didn't touch, knowing they contained whisky of the cheapest kind. He climbed down from the wagon and rolled a smoke. He watched the fat man sweat as he bent to the shovel.

When Weber had finished filling in the grave, Casey told him to climb to the wagon seat and pull out. Weber had his nerve back. He tried to argue.

"I don't know what your game is, but it'll pay you better to string along with me," he said. "Why buck something like this, Casey? It'll only get you in trouble. I'm just the go-between. If it's not me, it'll be somebody else."

"Talk some more, Weber."

"Money talks better, Casey. Name your own price."

"Sure. A dollar more than you can pay."

Weber's face flushed a dark, angry red. "You fool," he muttered. "This'll get you nothing. You take me to El Garito and my friends—"

"We're not going to El Garito," Casey told him. "I'm not that big a fool. I'm taking you straight to Camp Sand."

That got Big Weber. It seemed to knock the breath out of him. He tried to say something, but he uttered only choking sounds. A thin smile tugged at Jim Casey's lips.

"You know the Apaches killed Judd Brant?" he said. "First Brant got it, and then Peso. Now you, Weber. It's a good start, and I mean to see it through to the finish."

"What are you after, Casey?"

"You ever hear of what folks call the Indian Ring?"

"Talk!" Big Weber said, too loudly. "Just talk!"

"You'll change your tune at Sand, my friend," Casey said drily. "You'll squeal, then, to save your own hide. That's what I'm after, Weber. I want to hear what you know about the Ring. I want you to babble out some names. When those soldiers at Sand find out you've been selling the Apaches guns that have been killing

troopers, you'll get yours."

Casey needed to say no more. He could see the desperation in Big Weber, and knew that before they reached the military post panic would have hold of the man.

"Let's go, you fat son," Casey said. "We've nearly sixty miles ahead of us. And no tricks on the way, for I'd just as soon shoot you as not. You and every other blackleg that's a member of the Ring. Get going, Weber. Get going!"

They kept going all through the blazing hot afternoon, and at sundown had reached the water-hole at Black Rock, on the eastern edge of the Barrens. Casey called a halt there, to rest the horses. He ordered Big Weber to gather some brush and build a fire, then had him cook a meal. Casey ate with relish, for he was pleased with the way things were going. Weber, however, merely drank some coffee and passed up the grub. He was a man without an appetite. The horses watered, grained, rested, Casey rose at full dark.

"Thirty miles to go," he said. "Let's get at 'em."

They headed on through the darkness, Casey riding alongside the wagon and keeping a wary eye on his prisoner. He felt that Big Weber wouldn't pull anything, but he wanted to be sure. He was deep in a death game, against odds that would mount, and one slip—one unguarded moment—might be fatal. Big Weber had less to fear than Jim Casey, for the worst he faced was prison. Casey began to suspect that he really was a fool. A wise man wouldn't buck a thing like the Indian Ring.

BUT he wasn't backing down. He brought Big Weber to Camp Sand an hour after reveille, when the new sun was beginning to lay its scorching heat across the parade ground. Casey and his prisoner, and his wagonload of evidence, were passed from sentry to sergeant to Officer of the Day. Young Lieutenant Nichols nodded stiffly, listening to Casey's explanation.

"We'll place the matter before Major Hadley," he said.

In headquarters building, Major Hadley's steely eyes gleamed with a sort of wicked pleasure. He was a bulky man with iron-gray hair, a veteran Indian fighter. Even though he was Sand's commanding officer, he was hamstrung by rules and regulations. The Indian Bureau kept him from policing the Apache reservation, and territorial politicians interfered with his attempts to enforce the law upon renegade civilians. But Big Weber's apprehension by Jim Casey, a reputable rancher, was for Hadley a stroke of luck.

"So you caught him running guns and whisky to the Apaches?"

"That's it," Casey said. "He's been doing it for months. I got onto him because he always headed into the Barrens by crossing my range."

"You're willing to go into court and testify against him?"

"I've taken a hand in this, Major. I'll play it through."

"You know the risks you're taking?"

"I know, and they don't scare me any," Casey said. "If the Apaches are kept armed and stirred up, they'll get me sooner or later. I may as well take my chances against Weber and his *compadres*. I brought him here in the hope that you Army people could make him talk. Weber admits he's only the go-between. He was hauling those guns for somebody else."

Hadley scowled at Big Weber.

"I'm placing you in the guardhouse, while I send to Tucson for the United States marshal," he said. "You're headed for Yuma prison, sure, but by turning Government evidence you can lighten your sentence. You ready to talk, Weber?"

"If I talk, I'm a dead man," Weber said thickly. "I wouldn't be safe even in prison. I've got my rights. I want to send to El Garito for Judge Ben Hanlon."

"Hanlon's no judge."

"He's a lawyer. I've a right to counsel."

"You're pretty shrewd, my friend," Hadley said. He looked at Jim Casey. "How did you figure we could make him talk?"

"I figured he'd break down," Casey replied. "But he's got his nerve back. Tell you what, Major—you let me take him outside the post. You can send some men after him, telling them he's an escaped prisoner. Nobody can blame soldiers for shooting an escaped gun-runner."

It was a bluff on Casey's part, but it worked.

"You can't do that!" Weber said jumpily. "It'd be murder!"

Casey grabbed him by the arm. "Let's

go, Weber," he said.

The fat man broke, yelling, "Wait! I'll talk!" His breathing was labored, and he trembled. "Frank Averill furnished me with the guns and whisky out of his store in El Garito. I swear it!"

"He's a big man in the Ring?" Casey demanded.

"One of the biggest," Weber said, still talking under the pressure of his fear. "He owns El Garito, body and soul. That Indian agent, Brant, was in cahoots with him, and Judge Hanlon figures out a lot of the deals the Ring pulls. Then there's Cly Bateman, the contractor."

"Bateman's the man who built the schoolhouse at the San Marco Agency," Casey said. "There's been talk that it cost six thousand to build, but the Indian Bureau paid out thirty thousand for it."

"That's right," Weber muttered. "The Ring made twenty-four thousand dollars on the deal. Judd Brant got a cut out of it. So did Judge Hanlon and Frank Averill. But Bateman got the biggest share."

"Well, that's a start," Casey said. "Lock him up, Hadley."

The officer nodded to Lieutenant Nichols, and Big Weber was led away to the guardhouse. Major Hadley rose and offered Jim Casey his hand.

"The Army is grateful, sir," he said. "Too often, civilians are hostile to the Service, and that's what makes things difficult."

"What's the next step?" Casey asked.

"I'll send a rider to the United States marshal," Hadley told him. "The Army can't prosecute a civilian. It'll be up to the marshal to make use of Weber's testimony." He paused, frowning. "There's one trouble. Weber is liable to clam up, once he's turned over to the law. He may deny he talked at all."

"I was thinking that," Casey said. "But if we had some more evidence we could smash the Ring."

"I've not been overlooking the Ring," Hadley said. "In fact, I've used some of my command—both officers and enlisted men—in an attempt to gather evidence. So far, it's failed."

"Then it's up to me, sir."

"You, Casey? One man against the Ring?"

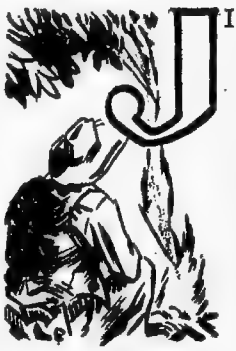
"I'd like to see it through."

"You'll be taking big risks," Hadley said. "But you'd be doing the whole Territory a great service." He smiled thinly. "I'll not try to change your mind. If you get into trouble, and can send word to me, I'll rush the whole garrison to give you a hand."

Casey grinned. "Thanks. Maybe together we can smash the Ring and wipe out El Garito—at the same time."

CHAPTER III

Cashiered Lieutenant



JIM CASEY left headquarters, cut across the parade ground to the sutler's store to buy some smoking tobacco. When he came from the store, he paused to roll a smoke. The garrison was gathering on the parade ground. The sutler came out.

"This is something to see, pardner," he said.

"What's up?"

"They're going to drum a soldier out of the regiment," the sutler said, and spat. "An officer. He got into some kind of trouble over at El Garito last week. Took part in a drunken brawl, the way I heard it. Shamed the Army. Now he's to be disgraced. Loco, the Army."

Casey had no desire to see any man disgraced for some mistake made under the influence of drink. Yet he remained. He stayed and watched without knowing why he did so.

He saw the entire garrison assemble as on dress parade. Several women watched from the 'dobes that made up Officers' Row. A couple more civilians gathered at the sutler's store, and half a dozen tame Indians gazed upon the scene with faces blank and eyes puzzled. The colors hung lifelessly from its high pole. The sun blazed down. The prisoner, in full uniform, was brought from the guardhouse. Casey saw he was a lieutenant, a blond young man. He was flanked by two sergeants. The three halted at attention before the ranks.

Casey frowned, and rolled another smoke.

An officer read aloud and monotonously from a paper. When he was finished, he stepped forward and relieved

the prisoner of his saber. Using the blade, he cut buttons and insignia from the prisoner's tunic. The man's hat was removed. A sergeant stepped forward with barbering tools, and one half the prisoner's head was shaved. Drums began to roll, drearily. A bugle sounded, and the bleak tune of the "Rogue's March" lifted. Beside Jim Casey, the sutler chanted softly:

"Poor old soldier—tarred and feathered, sent to blazes!"

The disgraced man was marched before the ranks of stiff-faced men and officers. The drums continued until he was escorted to the extreme edge of the post, where a saddled mount awaited him. It was over then.

Casey mounted his dun, rode out, leading his pack mare. He took the road to El Garito, and soon overtook the ex-officer. The man was afoot, leading his gray horse, and he was staring at the ground. He did not look up as Casey dismounted and walked beside him. They went on like that for a hot and dusty mile.

"I've got a ranch up north, close to the Barrens," Casey said. "I lost a hand to the Apaches a couple days back."

The man looked up, his lean face held expressionless by sheer will. He was young, boyish. "You offering me a job?"

"At forty a month, and found."

"I don't know anything about ranching."

"You'll learn."

"Maybe you didn't see what happened back there."

"Maybe I saw," Casey said. "But I sure don't know—or care—why it happened. Do you want the job?"

It took the man a long time to answer.

"I'll think it over," he said finally. "You're Jim Casey, aren't you? My name's Dan Colby." His voice turned bitter. "Before you offer to hire a man, you should learn something about him. I got into a jam at El Garito a week ago. I played the fool. Nowadays, a man can get drummed out of the Army for getting drunk. But I wasn't drunk. A little crazy, I guess, but not drunk."

"Well, you're not the first man to make a mistake."

"It wasn't a mistake," Dan Colby said angrily. "I knew what I was doing and I'd thought it out beforehand." It seemed that he needed to ease some of the pressure within him, and by talking found that relief. "I was on patrol with B Troop, about a month ago, when some of the San Marco Apaches jumped the reservation to join up with Geronimo. We ran into an ambush, and lost seven men."

"I heard about it," Casey said.

"We killed some of the Apaches and captured half a dozen brand-new Winchester rifles. That was something I couldn't forget—those rifles."

"So you worried about it," Casey said. "Then a week ago, when you couldn't stand it any longer, you went to El Garito and accused somebody there of running guns to the Apaches. Who was it you accused?"

"Frank Averill."

"Why him?"

THE ex-Army officer scowled with anger at the memory of his wrongs.

"He owns the biggest store in that hell-hole of a town," Colby said. "Averill denied he was selling guns to anybody but white men. I called him a liar. I guess I lost my head. Anyway, I knocked him down and searched his store. The only guns I found were the ones on display—a dozen rifles and about two dozen pistols. But I'd gamble Averill's got plenty of good rifles stored somewhere."

"So you got drummed out of the Army just for flooring Frank Averill," Casey said. "Or did you do something more?"

"I went over to the Silver Bell and had a drink," Colby went on. "A couple of drinks. I was there for a couple hours, I guess. One of the percentage girls hung around. Finally she whispered something about knowing something the Army should know—something about guns. I was a fool. I should have known it was a trap. But I let her take me upstairs, so we could talk in private, as she said.

"Once we got in her room, she tore her dress and mussed up her hair and started screaming. Everybody in the place came running. The men grabbed me, dragged me outside. I don't know what would have happened if some of the troopers hadn't been in town and saved me from the crowd."

"So you were framed because you bucked Frank Averill?"

"That's it. And I couldn't prove it was a frame-up."

"What do you figure on doing now?"

"I don't know," Colby said tonelessly. "A man's chances aren't much good after being drummed out of the Army. Maybe I'll take that job with you." He laughed hollowly. "Or maybe I'll join up with the Indian Ring. There should be room for a man who's been disgraced!"

He fell silent, and Casey made no comment. They kept on like that, walking and leading their horses. Casey was toying with an idea. The Indian Ring was not an organization; rather, it was merely a name given to a certain element that sought to profit by having the Apaches raid throughout the Territory.

Such a ring existed near every big Indian reservation, but here at El Garito, which was close to the San Marco Agency, it was bolder than most. The town had been founded by men like Frank Averill, Judge Ben Hanlon, and the building contractor, Cly Bateman, the majority of whom had left California, Nevada or New Mexico because of trouble with the law. Those states were making things too hot for such men, but the Territory gave them sanctuary.

But the shrewdest among the members of the Ring knew that Arizona would remain wide open and profitable to them only so long as it remained in a state of unrest. With the Apaches kept armed and troublesome, settlers would stay away, ranchers would be kept busy guarding their range and herds, and the Army would have its hands full trying to hold Apaches in check. Paradoxically, the Indian Ring even profited from the Army.

Frank Averill's store supplied Camp Sand with provisions. Another El Garito firm furnished grain and hay for the Army mounts. A cattle dealer sold beef to the San Marco Agency, for the Apaches, as well as to the post garrison. And El Garito's saloons and honky-tonks took the pay from the troopers' breeches. It was a vicious circle, the Indian Ring.

While the more cunning members swindled the Indian Bureau, provisioned the Army, armed and liquored the Apaches, the other under its protection worked out of El Garito at robbing stages and holding up trains, rustling and stealing horses, preying upon miners from Bisbee to Tombstone. Seldom did the U.S. marshal, busy with other law-breaking centers, get to El Garito. And the Army could not take over civilian law enforcement.

SO MUCH ran through Jim Casey's mind. "Colby, maybe you heard that I brought in Big Weber, after catching him running guns to the Apaches?" he said.

"I heard."

"Like you, I'd like to smash the Ring," Casey went on. "I've been thinking we could work together. I'm going into El Garito to find out what I can. Nobody there knows yet that I jumped Big Weber, so I'll have no trouble—for a time, at least. And if you play it right, now that you've been drummed out, you may be able to take up with the Ring, and learn something."

"How could I work it?" Dan Colby asked. "So that crowd won't be suspicious?"

"That's easy enough," Casey told him. "Make a show of getting drunk, start beefing about the deal the Army gave you, and wait for something to happen." They halted and faced one another. "You game, *amigo?*"

"Sure," said Dan Colby. "I've got nothing to lose, now."

"Only your life," Casey told him. "Shall we shake on it?"

They did.

They parted. Dan Colby mounted and kept to the road, while Casey, also mounting, left the road and headed out across the desert. It seemed wiser, under the circumstances, for each to enter El Garito alone. Casey circled around so that he could reach the town from the north, thus making it appear he had arrived straight from his ranch. He waited until dark to ride in.

El Garito was a one-street town, some of its buildings adobe and some unpainted frame. A small portion of its citizens were Mexicans, and they were law-abiding enough, but the majority were men on the shady side of the Law, and the sort of women who followed such men. El Garito boasted no family homes, except the few Mexican 'dobes.

There was a two-storied hotel, the Trail House, and it was "home" to some of the citizens. Others holed up in 'dobe huts or frame shacks, or had rooms over the saloons. There were a dozen saloons, ranging from a big honky-tonk, the Silver Bell, down to a hole-in-the-wall bar.

Frank Averill's store was the biggest building, it being combined with a warehouse. Next to Averill's place was a lumber yard; its office bore a sign reading:

Cly Bateman, Building Supplies & Contracting. Beyond was a grubby restaurant. Judge Ben Hanlon's office was above the restaurant. There were saddle mounts racked all along the crooked street.

Casey dismounted at Joe Small's livery barn, and turned his horses over to the Mexican hostler.

"Take good care of them," he said, and tossed the Mexican a silver dollar. "Did that posse come back from chasing the Apaches?"

"*Si, senor.* Those hombres chased for only two days."

Casey nodded and walked off down the street. Averill's store was lamplighted and a clerk was moving about inside. Reaching the Silver Bell, Casey shouldered through the swing doors. A piano was being drummed, and a Mexican youth was strumming a guitar. Some men were dancing with the girls. The gambling tables were busy, as was the long bar. Dan Colby was at the bar talking loudly and drunkenly to "Judge" Ben Hanlon. The dark-faced lawyer was listening sympathetically.

Half a dozen ranchers and at least a dozen cowpunchers were present, forming a circle of their own, but most of the crowd were men who put up at El Garito. Casey stopped at the bar for a drink, and saw Frank Averill at a corner table with Cly Bateman, the contractor. A girl with bleached hair and a mechanical smile came up to Casey, but he shook his head and said, "Not tonight, sweetheart." He was watching Dan Colby and Judge Hanlon. Those two had left the bar and were going to join Averill and Bateman. Colby was unsteady on his feet, either drunk or pretending to be.

Once Judge Hanlon got Colby seated, the four men now at the table put their heads together.

The swing doors opened to admit a newcomer, and Casey was gripped by a sudden frozen feeling. The newcomer was the bald little sutler from Camp Sand, Luke Wyman. He bustled into the center of the wide room, his eyes searching the place for someone. He looked like a man carrying news. And Casey knew the only news Luke Wyman could have was that of Big Weber's arrest.

Casey shoved away from the bar, moving fast.

CHAPTER IV

Raid for Evidence

WYMAN was headed for the corner table, and had just called out, "Frank — Mr. Averill," when Casey reached him. Casey, blocked Wyman's way, pinning him between two deal tables.

"Outside, Luke," Casey said. "Move fast, and keep your mouth shut."

Wyman blinked watery eyes, "I've got a right to talk to Mr. Averill," he said, with diminishing conviction. "Get out of my way!"

Casey's right fist moved no more than three inches, but it folded the little man over and forced gasping sounds from his throat. Casey caught hold of him, spun him about, and walked him, as he would have walked a drunk, from the Silver Bell. He had Luke Wyman on the street before the man had recovered his breath. A spring wagon stood nearby.

"Your rig, Luke?"

"Yes, blast you!"

"Climb into it and get out fast," Casey said. "Go back to Camp Sand and stay there. If you show up here again, I'll get rough."

"Listen, Casey, I've got to talk to Frank Averill."

"Forget it, Luke. Forget it, and get out."

"No, don't forget it, Luke," Frank Averill's voice said. "Maybe it's important. What'd you know that's got Casey so worried?"

He let the batwings close behind him, ever so slowly, and strolled to the edge of the saloon porch. He towered there, puffing on a cigar, dark eyes questioning—a little worried. Averill was heavy for a man of his age, a bit flabby, but he was handsome enough. And he had the air of a prosperous merchant. He gestured now.

"All right, Luke—talk."

Casey drew his six-gun. He had bluffed Big Weber, and he might be able to run a bluff on this pale shadow of a man, Luke Wyman.

"Luke, I'll bet you won't get more

than two words out'" he said. "You figure it's worth it?"

"He's bluffing, Luke," Averill said. "Call him." But Luke Wyman wasn't sure. He shrank back—one step, a second, a third—then he suddenly whirled and made for his wagon and team. He got the team started, using the whip, and headed out of El Garito. Casey chuckled.

"Too bad when a man hasn't any courage, Frank."

"That's right, Jim. But sometimes a man has too much courage."

"Meaning me?"

"That's right," Averill said. He tossed away his cigar, came down from the porch. "I'm going to the livery barn for a horse, and I'm going to ride after that timid fool. You going to try to stop me?"

Casey shook his head. "Not yet, Frank," he said, and watched the big man walk off toward Small's livery. He was still looking after him when a woman's voice called his name. It was one of the Silver Bell's girls, dark-haired Maria. Casey new her from other trips to El Garito, perhaps because she had always gone out of her way to make friendly overtures toward him. Now Maria gave him a flirtatious smile, over her shoulder, and strolled along the Bell's porch. At the far end, she stepped down and vanished into the alleyway between the saloon and the neighboring building. Casey rolled and lighted a smoke, then went after her.

"Maria?"

"Jim, keep your voice low," the girl said, and came so close he was tantalized by a faint breath of perfume.

"Jim, there's danger," she whispered. "Frank Averill and some others are out to get you."

"How do you know?"

"Averill saw you ride in tonight. He passed the word to Judge Hanlon and Cly Bateman, then he came to me." Maria paused, caught hold of Casey's arm. "He figured you'd come to see me, because you did other times. He told me to try to find out what you're up to."

"And you decided to tip me off?"

"I like you, Casey. I've always been fond of you."

"Well, I'm obliged to you," Casey said. He could feel her pressing lightly against him. He put his arm about her and held her tight. Maria was a pretty girl, likable, and now—this. "You're not worried about me? A girl like you knows the world if full of men."

"That's a rotten thing to say to me, after I give you a friendly warning."

"Sorry, darling. Where can I see you later?"

"I don't know if I want to see you now."

"You want to help me, don't you?" Casey said. "Look, honey; I know where your room is. Stay awake tonight and close to your window. I may call you to do something for me if the going gets tough. Now go back inside and slip word to Dan Colby that I want to see him here."

IT WAS several minutes before Colby came lurching out like a drunk. Casey noted two minor occurrences in the street. Frank Averill rode out of the livery barn and away from town, and at Averill's store, across the street, the late-working clerk came out, locked the door, and departed. He had left a single lamp, its wick turned low, burning in the far rear of the store.

"What's up, Casey?" Dan Colby said. His voice was excited, but he wasn't drunk.

"Averill rode out of town," Casey whispered. "This is a good time to make a search of his place for rifles. You want to risk it?"

"Let's go," the younger man said.

They crossed the street, ducked into the alleyway between the store and the lumber yard. The side of the store building was without doors or windows, but at the rear there were both. The door was a wide one, to admit large cases of merchandise. It was locked. The window too was secured, by a peg or a nail, so Casey took off his brush jacket and held it over one of the small panes. The jacket deadened the sound when he smashed the pane with the butt of his six-gun. He reached in through the opening, fumbled about, removed the nail that locked the sash, and a minute later both men were inside.

"You searched the place, so there's no use looking in the obvious places again," Casey told Dan Colby. "There's no second story and there's no side rooms except Averill's office. You look in there?"

Colby nodded. "There's only a desk and a small safe."

"Let's take a look," Casey said.

Once in the little office, he walked heavily back and forth testing the floor with his boot heels. It rang hollowly.

"There's a cellar and there's a trap door in the corner," Casey said.

A chair stood upon the trap door. Casey removed it and lifted the trap. He had to strike a match to see down into the cellar, and its flickering glow revealed a ladder. Casey went down. His match burned out and he struck another. He saw a large room filled with cases marked "Winchester," and some were the long flat ones that were used to ship repeating rifles. The others contained ammunition. Casey went back up the ladder.

"We've found his cache," Casey said. "There must be five hundred rifles down there, and ten thousand rounds of ammunition."

"What'll we do now?"

"Get out of here," Casey said, closing the trap and replacing the chair. "And pay a visit to Cly Bateman's lumber yard."

They didn't need to smash a window to enter the lumber-yard's office. The lock on the door of the box-sized building was wobbly, and it gave when Casey flung his weight against the flimsy door. The office was dark, and, since it fronted on the street Casey could risk no light. He felt his way about, going through Cly Bateman's rolltop desk Its cubbyholes were crammed with all sorts of papers and business letters but Casey knew that such documents were worthless as evidence that Bateman was a member of the Indian Ring and a swindler, so he passed them up.

"The stuff we need," Casey whispered, "would be locked up or hidden some place. Bateman must keep some records of his crooked deals."

Colby was prowling about in the dark.

"Here's a picture on the wall," he muttered. "Maybe— Here it is, Casey! A little cupboard in the wall."

"Anything in it?"

"Some money. Some papers and a small ledger."

"Well, we don't want his money" Casey said drily.

They left Bateman's office, taking with them the papers and the ledger. Casey told Dan Colby to pocket the stuff. Colby was a little worried. "You sure the Law will make use of stolen evidence?"

"Who's going to prove it's stolen?" Casey said. "We'll give this to Major Hadley, and he can turn it over to the U. S. marshal, and nobody can accuse Hadley of burglarizing these places."

"You going to Camp Sand now?"

"Not yet," Casey said. "Judge Ben Hanlon is one of the biggest sharpers in the Ring and I want to get something on him."

Judge Hanlon had his law office and living quarters on the second floor of the building that housed the Frisco Cafe. An open stairway at the side led up to his door, and the door was unlocked. The front room was the office, and it smelled of stale tobacco smoke and whisky. A broad table served as a desk. There was a book case full of law tomes, and there was a safe—locked. Casey had drawn the window shades and lighted the oil lamp. No papers or letters or ledgers were in evidence.

"A lawyer's too smart," Casey said. "And it'd take dynamite to open that safe."

"Casey, I hear something—sure!" Dan Colby said.

CASEY heard something, too. He blew out the lamp flame, drew his six-gun, and waited. Somebody was climbing the outside stairs. The door opened, a man stepped in, and the door closed. A match was struck, flickered, and Casey saw Judge Hanlon's heavy florid face. The lawyer moved to the table, reached out for the lamp shade. He felt the warmth of the shade, and a grunt escaped him. He dropped the match, whirled about. Casey stepped in front of the door.

"Keep still and quiet, Judge," he said. "I've got you covered."

"Who are you?" Hanlon demanded. There was uneasiness in his deep voice, but no fear. "What do you want?"

"Open your safe, Judge."

"I've got no money in there."

"Open it anyway. We'll take a look."

"All right. But I've got to have some light, to work the dial."

"Use a match, Hanlon, and keep your face to the safe," Casey said. "If you should happen to see me and my pard, it's the last thing you'll ever see."

"All right," Hanlon said, and turned to the safe. He knelt before it, and Casey was worried. "This is too easy!" he told himself and stepped over behind the lawyer, just as Hanlon grabbed a Derringer

from inside his coat and swung around. Casey struck down with the butt of his six-gun, hard against Hanlon's head. The Derringer roared as the pudgy man slumped down. Casey was not hit, but he cursed this turn in his luck.

"Clear out, Dan," he said. "The whole town'll be roused and we're liable to make lynch-rope bait!"

CHAPTER V

Grim Search

YET they got safely down from Hanlon's place, before the men who had poured into the street made up their minds as to where the gunshot had been fired. Casey shoved his partner toward the rear of the building, and they managed to lose themselves in the darkness before Judge Hanlon started shouting.

They made their way to the livery barn. The Mexican was staring downstreet where a big crowd was milling about. Hanlon was loudly saying that a couple of hardcases had tried to rob and murder him.

"Dan, I'm going to take that stuff to Camp Sand," Casey said. Dan Colby handed Cly Bateman's papers and ledger over to him. "You better go back to pretendin' you're drunk."

"I'll see you again, Casey?"

"Sure. Come up to my ranch."

They shook hands and parted, Dan Colby staggering down the street to join the excited crowd. Casey went over to the Mexican youth, gave him two more silver dollars.

"Saddle up my horses, *amigo*, and keep quiet." The boy stared hard, then grinned and nodded.

Casey watched from the deep shadows alongside the barn. He saw a rider come loping into town, from the Camp Sand road, and it was the burly Frank Averill. Evidently, Averill had overtaken and had a talk with Luke Wyman and learned that Casey had brought Big Weber in from the Barrens. Averill reined in.

"What happened?" he demanded.

The crowd fell silent, to let Judge Hanlon answer. In his resounding courtroom voice, Hanlon told about his encounter with two hold-up men.

Averill muttered an oath. "Those two weren't after your money, Ben," he said loudly. "They were after your papers and one of them was Jim Casey. He brought Big Weber in from the Barrens and turned him over to the Army. Weber's being held for gun-running. I've got a good notion that the hombre with Casey was that lieutenant who got drummed out of Sand today. Luke Wyman saw Casey and Dan Colby together on the road, after they left Camp Sand."

"There's Dan Colby now, but he's drunk!" somebody yelled.

"Drunk or sober, grab him!" Averill yelled.

Casey groaned. For Dan Colby threw off his pretense of drunkenness. He grabbed out his six-gun and started yelling back at Averill.

"Sure I was with Casey!" he shouted. "We didn't get Hanlon's papers, but we did get Cly Bateman's. And we found where you cache your trade rifles, Averill. Casey's on his way to Sand now and you're done, tinhorn. The whole rotten Indian Ring's done for. I swore I'd get you!"

A gun roared once, twice and a third time, and the life was ripped out of young Dan Colby. Casey had taken a step from his hiding-place, with gun in hand, but there had been no chance of siding the hot-headed ex-Army officer. Dan Colby had fired no shots, but he had had a gun in his hand—and Frank Averill could maintain that he had fired in self-defense. For it had been Averill who had cut Colby down.

"Get his carcass off the street, some of you hombres," Averill said.

Casey drew back into the shadows again, bitter over his inability to have helped Dan Colby. All he could do now was to mutter a promise under his breath. "I'll square it for you, Dan, somehow," he whispered. Then he was attentive again. Frank Averill was haranguing the crowd.

"Casey didn't pass me on the road to Sand. So he must still be here in town," he said. "Spread out and find him, boys, and I'll give a thousand dollars to the man who puts a bullet into him!"

Casey took to his heels. With this hue and cry being raised, there was no time

for him to wait for his horses. He kept to the back of the buildings until he reached the Silver Bell, then plunged into the dark and narrow alleyway alongside the honky-tonk. The alley was littered with rubbish from the Bell, and Casey found an empty whisky barrel. He up-ended it beneath the window of Maria's room, climbed upon it, and by jumping he caught hold of the sill. The window was open.

"Casey?" Maria said softly.

Casey strained, and broke out in a sweat. He could get no foothold, so his arms took the full burden of pulling his weight up. The search was drawing close as Maria caught him, first by the shoulders and then by the belt, and helped drag him over the sill. He spilled into the dark room and lay gasping, while men searched through the alleyway below. When the searchers went on to the rear, Casey picked himself up. The girl wanted to come into his arms. He held her off.

"Listen to me, Maria," he said, whispering it. "I want you to go to Camp Sand as soon as you can, and give these papers and this book to Major Hadley. And tell him I said Frank Averill has an arms cache, trade guns, in a cellar under his office. You got it?"

The girl didn't answer immediately. He could sense her disappointment. She had been waiting for him there in the dark, but not to be sent on an errand.

"All right," she said, huskily, at last. "But what's in it for me? You're asking me to cross up my own kind of people. So what's in it for me?"

"Anything you want of me, Maria," Casey said. "If I get out of this."

"You're not going to get out of it, are you, Casey?"

"No, I guess not."

"Would Major Hadley send help, if he knew this town was out to kill you?"

"He made me a sort of promise," Casey said.

Maria was silent a moment, gazing at him in the gloom. "I guess I'm just a fool for you, Casey. I guess I've been a fool since the first time I saw you, a year ago, even though I knew you never gave me a thought after going back to your ranch. Casey, I'm going now."

"Not now, Maria. Tomorrow, when it's safe."

"Tomorrow you'll be dead, if I don't get help now," Maria said. "Don't worry about me, Casey. I can get out of this town anytime."

She leaned toward him, and her lips brushed Casey's cheek. Then she was moving away from him. The door of the little room opened and closed, and the girl was gone. Casey stood there in the dark, full of disturbing thoughts. He could hear the search for him boiling around the town. Once a couple of guns opened up somewhere. Finally the searchers came into the Silver Bell, up to the little rooms occupied by the honky-tonk girls.

Casey went out the window. Once on the ground, he decided to leave town afoot. It seemed that the wolf pack wouldn't guess that a man might take to the desert without a mount. But almost at once, Casey saw that was no good. Somebody, no doubt Frank Averill, had out-guessed him. Riders were circling the town, out there in the darkness. Panic gripped Jim Casey. Not for himself, but for the girl Maria.

"If she's caught with those papers on her, she's done," he thought, and tried not to think about it.

Crouched there in the dark alley, with gun in hand, listening to the shouts of the searchers, Casey racked his brain trying to figure out a hiding-place that Frank Averill and his bounty-crazed hunters would overlook. Some of them were ransacking the Silver Bell at this very moment. Others were going through the other saloons. Every place in El Garito, down to the smallest Mex 'dobe, would be searched. *All,* Casey suddenly thought, but one! There was a chance that Frank Averill would not guess that his own store was a sanctuary for his quarry!

To reach Averill's place, Casey had to cross the street. He did so by walking boldly, openly, directly from the Silver Bell. There were men on the Bell's porch. There was a big crowd up by Joe Small's livery barn, where Casey's horses must have been discovered. Other men, mostly in groups, were ranged the length of El Garito's crooked street. Surely some of them saw Jim Casey make his crossing, but in the darkness, and perhaps because of his boldness, he wasn't recognized. He breathed easier, once he was between store and lumber yard. And he was smiling crookedly once he reached the store's rear and once more entered by the window.

The lamp the clerk had left burning had been turned higher, no doubt by Frank Averill when he entered the store to see if Dan Colby had spoken the truth about having found the arms cache. Casey let the lamp burn brightly. He turned into the little office, into which some of the lamplight leaked, and saw that the chair had been removed from the trap-door. Averill had sought to convince himself. Sighing wearily, Casey seated himself and rolled a smoke. He could still hear men prowling about outside.

He tried not to think of his own plight, considered instead Dan Colby who had been disgraced yet had died as courageously as any soldier. And Casey thought of his ranch up there on the edge of the Barrens, for he loved the place as a man can only love a home he'd fought for. He told himself wryly that Andy Ketch and Pablo would soon consider him dead, and they wouldn't be wrong. Casey sat there relishing a quirly smoke, but he was a dead man.

No, not quite a dead man. For his pulse suddenly quickened. He had thought of Maria. He'd never heard her other name. But he could remember now the warm softness of her arms, eager for him, and in his mind he could see her smile and the way her eyes always lighted up at sight of him. She had done his bidding, dangerous though it was, without hoping to gain anything for herself. But what was it the Marias of this world wanted? A man to love? Casey didn't know. He wished he might ask Maria.

An hour passed, and Casey dozed a bit. Then he had another smoke. He could hear nothing from outside now, and that silence made him smile. Frank Averill had halted the noisy man-hunt, and now was trying some trick to flush his quarry into the open. Sit tight, Casey! He sat there in Averill's office, and smoked his quirly down until it threatened to scorch his lips. Then he heard a new racket in the street.

There was a drumming of many hoofs. Men shouted and guns blasted. Casey left his chair, hurried from the office. He moved from one display of merchandise to another, until he reached the front window. One glance was enough. Cavalry from Camp Sand was in El Garito, and some crazy fools were firing upon the troopers. But cavalry carbines were returning the fire. Hell had broken out in El Garito.

Something happened behind Casey, at the rear of the long crowded room. He whirled around and saw Frank Averill. The big man had entered by the rear door and now was taking the one lighted lamp down from its wall bracket. Not having seen Casey, Averill went into his office, Casey drew his six-gun and went after him.

When he reached the office door, he saw that Averill had the trap door open. The man flung the burning lamp down into the gun cache. There was a small explosion. A puff of smoke and flames leapt from the trap. Averill stood there watching, the red glow from below bright upon his face.

"Destroying the evidence, Frank?" Casey said. "And your entire store along with it? Shucks, man! That must hurt!"

AVERILL whirled about, his right hand going beneath his coat. His heavy face was contorted with rage and shock, but seeing Casey's gun, he did not draw his own weapon.

"Blast you, Casey," he muttered. "You sneaking coyote!"

"Frank, you always were a blackleg," Casey said. "Five years ago, when we were operating that freighting line as partners, you cheated me out of most of the profits. But this is a dirtier game."

"What do you want, Casey?"

"I've got what I want, Frank," Casey said. "Hear all that shooting? The Indian Ring is being smashed, and that's what I want. Some fool put those other fools up to firing on the cavalry, and that's too bad. Frank, I saw you kill Dan Colby. He was a decent sort."

Averill said nothing. Flames were leaping high out of the trap behind him. He still had his hand on his gun.

"I guess you'll hang for killing Colby, Frank," Casey went on. "Unless you want to shoot it out with me—which I'd kind of like."

"Have it your way, Casey," Averill said, and drew. Casey let him get his gun clear of its holster, then he swung his own six-gun up and shot him as Averill had shot Dan Colby—three .45 slugs aimed at the heart.

Averill's one shot went wild, and Casey, after the man lay sprawled, stepped over him and slammed the trap door. With it closed and the air shut off, the fire should die out. Outside, the shooting was letting up. The Indian

Ring at El Garito had been smashed in one wild night. . . .

Casey picked Maria up at Camp Sand at sunup. The girl had stayed there after giving Major Hadley the papers and ledger Casey had sent, along with Casey's message about the arms cache. She had also told the officer that Casey needed help, and Hadley had decided to make a quick visit to El Garito. Maria hadn't had any trouble getting out of town. She had merely taken a horse and ridden out. Nobody had tried to stop her.

But she told Casey all that later.

When he rode up to Sand, she came from Major Hadley's quarters. She no longer was wearing her be-spangled red honky-tonk dress, but a fashionable and ladylike gray one.

"The Major's wife gave it to me," she explained. "If you must know, Casey."

"I didn't ask," Casey said.

"It's a wonder you even came to thank me."

Casey grinned and dismounted. He was leading not only his pack mare but also a sorrel rigged with a side saddle. He caught Maria and picked her up, lifting her onto the sorrel.

"I've got your clothes on the mare," he said. Went to your room at the Silver Bell for them. We're heading for my ranch, Maria."

"*We!*"

"Oh, we'll find a parson somewhere, first."

"Casey, you wouldn't marry a—a honky-tonk girl!"

Casey mounted his dun.

"Wouldn't I?" he said, grinning. "You wait and see!"

Looking Forward to Our Next Issue!

RIP-ROARING thrills and uproarious humor on every page of BANDIT BUSTERS OF WAR DANCE—the new Speedy and Tombstone adventure by W. C. Tuttle featured next issue! This smashing novel of the rollicking range sleuths is one of the funniest and best yarns W. C. Tuttle has ever written—one of the jolliest fiction treats in years!

* * * * *

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* * * * *

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* * * * *

GETTING off to a swell start, Chuck Martin begins a new series of stories in the next issue with a yarn entitled TANGLE FOOT which will please you mightily. It's filled with human interest and action—and it's the first of a number of stories revolving around Jim Bowen, the range sleuth and cobbler.

* * * * *

EXCELLENT short stories of the West by your favorite writers, plus departments and another instalment of Chuck Stanley's fascinating series, THE COWBOY HAD A WORD FOR IT, round out a splendid issue which is well worth looking forward to!

Fenton swung himself across the bay and struck Rawley heavily across the head with his six-shooter

TOO SMART FOR HIS OWN GOOD

By ANDREW BRONSON

The bandit is bold when he robs the Bar M Payroll—but Buck Rawley is still bolder when he battles to get the money back!

A FULL moon hung above the towering peaks to the eastward, its pale light serving to accentuate the darkness of the shadows all around Buck Rawley as he rode warily along the trail, one hand close to the gun on his left hip. The night was quiet. The only sounds Rawley heard were the soft drumming of the bay's hoofs on the hard-packed dirt of the road and the creaking of his saddle leather.

"I don't like it," Rawley muttered, thinking of the payroll. "It's too blasted quiet to seem natural."

The uneasiness that had crept over him as he rode away from the town just as it was growing dark, was still with him. His gaze constantly searched the shadows. This was dangerous country for a man carrying a ranch payroll to ride through after dark.

Ahead the trail started upward, wandering higher and higher, finally curving around the upper part of a cliff wall. Huge boulders were scattered about at the start of the rise. The horse snorted

as he approached the big rocks.

Rawley had thought he was ready for trouble yet when it came, it appeared so quietly that he was taken unaware. One moment he was guiding the bay along the trail through the rock, and the next there was another horseman riding silently beside him.

It was a big man on a black horse who rode now on Rawley's right. His saddle leather did not creak and Rawley was not certain he could hear the hoofbeats of the black mingling with those of the bay. There was something eerie, ghostlike about the horseman who had come out of the shadows.

"Who are you?" Rawley asked finally, fingers on the butt of his gun as he peered at the face of the man beside him. "What do yuh want?"

It seemed a long time before the answer came. The horses went on up the trail. Relief swept over Rawley as he found he could distinguish the beat of the black's hoofs from that of his own mount. At least the strange rider's horse was real.

"I'm Dart Fenton." The big man's voice was low and strangely musical as he finally spoke. "Seein' as yore knowin' my name won't ever matter." He looked at the big, young dark haired waddy on his right. "You might tell me who yuh are so's I can notify folks after you're dead."

"Buck Rawley." Rawley's tone was equally quiet. "And yuh don't need to worry, Fenton. I ain't aiming to die for a while."

"None of us aim to do that," Fenton said. "But it happens sometimes." The big man shook his head sadly. "Specially when I'm around. Yuh know I got an idea I'm plumb unlucky to some people."

There was a strange note in Dart Fenton's tone, as though he actually considered himself a sinister emissary of Fate and regretted it. A strange man and, in Rawley's estimation, an extremely dangerous one.

THE horses climbed steadily until they reached the place where the trail circled around the face of the cliff. Here it was still wide enough for the two men to continue riding side by side.

"You tell it scary," Rawley said. "But I don't frighten easy. Why do you figger I'm going to die?"

"Because I'm goin' to kill you," said Fenton dispassionately. "I happen to be a hombre who's cursed with the love of money. I saw yuh draw a large amount of cash out of the bank in Red Gulch this afternoon, and I want that dinero."

Rawley's fingers tightened on his gun, ready for the big man to draw, but Fenton's actions were as startling as they were unexpected. The two men were riding close together. Fenton reached out and jabbed Rawley in the right ankle with a spur. The pain was so sharp that Rawley flinched, instinctively jerking his foot out of the stirrup.

Fenton thrust his own foot into the empty stirrup, caught the horn of Rawley's saddle and swung himself onto the waddy's horse. The bay bumped hard against the black as the two horses grew frightened and started to run. Suddenly the black lost his footing, plunged over the edge of the ledge, and went crashing down through the branches of thick brush below.

"Got yuh now," Fenton growled, and his voice was no longer soft or musical. "This is yore finish!"

He had his gun in his hand. He brought the barrel crashing down on Rawley's head. Blackness swept over Rawley as he lapsed into unconsciousness. Fenton tossed the limp form off the horse, and watched Rawley land on the rim trail and sprawl there motionless. Then Fenton searched and found the payroll money in a saddle-pocket on the bay.

"That's that," Fenton said, frowning. "Too bad it had to happen the way it did. I kind of liked that jasper." Then he settled himself in the saddle and rode away.

Gradually the hoofbeats of the bay died away. In a few moments he was gone. The still form of Buck Rawley sprawled there motionless in the moonlight. . . .

It was just after sunrise the next morning that Buck Rawley rode into the Bar M ranch on a black horse. Both horse and rider looked like they had been through some mighty tough going. Old Bill Martin, owner of the Bar M, came out on the porch of the ranchhouse as Rawley halted the black near the steps. The waddy got stiffly out of the saddle and came up on the porch.

"Change yore mind?" Martin asked, his blue eyes cold as he gazed at the waddy. "Figgered yuh would be far away by this time, Rawley."

"Meaning what?" Rawley asked.

"Yore bay hoss wandered in late last night with the saddle empty," said the boss of the Bar M. "We thought somethin' had happened to you until we found the note fastened to the saddle, tied there by a latigo string."

"What note?" demanded Rawley.

Martin reached into a pocket of his levis. He drew out a sheet of paper and handed it to Rawley. The waddy read what had been written in pencil:

Dear Boss:

By the time you get this I will be so far away you will never find me. I'm taking the payroll money you sent me to town to get and leaving this part of the country for good. Sorry it has to be this way, but a feller has to think of himself to get ahead. Adios.

Buck Rawley.

"I didn't write this," Rawley said. "It don't even look like my handwriting, boss."

"I know." Martin nodded. "I checked that note with some samples of yore handwriting I had around, Buck." The rancher sank into a chair and motioned Rawley into another nearby. "Now tell me what happened?"

Rawley related just what had occurred after he had met Dart Fenton on the trail. Martin listened silently until Rawley reached the point of telling how Fenton's horse had gone over the cliff, just before Rawley had been knocked senseless.

"But why wasn't the black killed?" Martin asked. "That's Fenton's hoss yuh're ridin', ain't it, Buck?"

"It is," said Rawley. "The black went over the cliff but some brush broke his fall. He was all right when I found him down below this mornin'." The waddy frowned. "Now that yuh know that Dart Fenton stole the payroll money, all yuh got to do is make a complaint to the Sheriff."

"Afraid it isn't that simple," said Martin. "In the first place Sheriff Lang won't believe that Dart Fenton would steal any ranch payroll money."

PUZZLED, the young cowboy pushed back his Stetson to scratch his head.

"Why not?" asked Rawley. "Remember I only been ridin' for the Bar M for a couple of months so I don't know all the folks in this part of the country. Who's Dart Fenton anyway?"

"He's supposed to be one of the richest men in Mesquite Valley," said Martin. "He's head of the Acme Minin' Company over at the south end of the valley. From all I hear the mine is turning out a lot of gold." The ranch owner smiled grimly. "So why would Fenton want to steal a ranch payroll. There wasn't but five hundred dollars in the payroll."

"Four hundred and seventy-six dollars and fifty-three cents," said Rawley. "That's the amount yuh had on the check I got cashed, boss." He got to his feet. "I aim to prove Fenton stole the money. Also I'll get it back and make him tell why he did it."

"All right with me, if you can do it," said Martin. "But yuh shore picked yoreself a job, Buck." He looked intently at the young waddy. "Even though you're a new man in the outfit, I believe yore story, and I'm trustin' you to do like yuh say."

"Thanks, boss." Rawley flushed with gratitude at Martin's words. "I'll do it." He was still holding the note that had been pinned on his saddle. Now he folded it up and thrust it into a pocket of his levis. "Soon's I rest up, I'm saddlin' a fresh hoss and ridin' over to the Acme Mining Company, to have a little talk with Dart Fenton."

"That should be right interestin'," said Bill Martin as he got up and went into the ranchhouse.

Rawley's head still ached from the blow Fenton had hit him with the gun-barrel. He rode the black to the cavvy corral, unsaddled the horse, turned it into the enclosure with the rest of the horses there, and headed for the Bar M bunkhouse.

Old Jeff Lee, the ranch cook, was sitting on a bench in front of the bunkhouse peeling potatoes. The men of the outfit had eaten their breakfast and ridden out on the range to do their work.

"A bad penny always turns up," said the cook as he saw Rawley. "Where have you been, Buck?"

"Gettin' over a headache I got from a gun-barrel," said Rawley, seating himself on the bench beside the cook. "Feller named Dart Fenton knocked me over the head and stole the ranch payroll last night."

"That isn't the way I heard it," said Lee. "According to the note you wrote, you should be in Mexico or some place

by this time."

"I didn't write that note," said Rawley. "Fenton must have done it. He shore took a chance on nobody around here knowin' my handwritin'. Reckon he figgered he hit me so hard he killed me."

"Fenton, eh?" said the cook thoughtfully. Old Jeff Lee was an odd character. He had been a cook all his life and a good one. It was the sort of work he liked best, claiming that it gave him more time for reading, and he read good books. "Strange man, Fenton. Always going around voicing platitudes. There's a man who is too smart for his own good."

"Boss says nobody will believe Fenton stole the payroll," said Rawley.

"They won't," said Lee. "Not with Fenton supposed to be so rich from his gold mine." The old cook grinned. "Guess it takes a thief to catch a thief."

Rawley stared at the cook for a moment and then nodded as an idea struck him.

"Yuh're right, Jeff," he said as he got to his feet. "It takes just that."

A half hour later Buck Rawley left the Bar M, riding a roan horse from his string and with his saddle roll tied to the cantle.

He rode south across the valley, and had traveled five or six miles before he finally saw the buildings and shaft of a gold mining operation ahead of him.

It was the square one-story wooden building with the sign Acme Mining Company Office on it that focused Rawley's attention. As he rode closer, Dart Fenton came to the door and stood there watching him. The big man wore no hat, and Rawley saw that Fenton was partially bald.

"Howdy," Rawley said as he halted the roan near the door of the office. "You shore worked it slick as a whistle, Fenton. The boss figgers I made up the story about you stealin' the payroll money, so he fired me."

"I told you I was unlucky for other people," said Fenton sadly. "But I made one mistake, Rawley. I thought I hit you hard enough to kill you. I should have made sure of that."

Rawley frowned. This wasn't what he had expected. He had believed that Fenton would deny the whole thing, claiming that he had never seen Rawley before in his life. Yet here was Fenton calmly admitting everything. Rawley couldn't decide whether or not that was a smart move on Fenton's part.

AS HE sat in the saddle looking around, it dawned on Rawley that there were no signs of activity at the Acme Mine. No men were working. In fact there didn't seem to be anybody around the place but Fenton. That just wasn't customary for a mine that was supposed to be turning out a lot of gold.

Rawley remembered that he had heard stories of other ranch payroll robberies during the past month and once the west bound Overland stage had been held up and the money box stolen. It had been a lone masked man who had committed those robberies. He had not been caught.

"I just came to tell yuh that I aim to make yuh pay for what yuh done to me, Fenton," said Rawley quietly. "You'll find that I'm right unlucky to some folks, too."

"Then I better do something about it fast," Fenton said.

His hand flashed down to the gun in his holster. He had the weapon half raised when Rawley shot the Colt out of his hand. The bullet from Rawley's gun had struck metal, so the big man's hand was not hurt.

Fenton looked at his empty hand, the gun lying on the ground and then at the big dark-haired waddy still sitting calmly in the saddle. There was an expression of fright on the mine owner's face.

"Yuh're fast with a gun," he muttered. "Faster than I am."

"Right!" Rawley nodded. "And I usually hit where I aim." He smiled grimly. "Yuh know I'm beginnin' to feel sorry for you, Fenton. Yes, sir, I'd shore hate to be in a tight like you are."

"Meanin' what?" asked Fenton anxiously.

"That you are goin' to suffer a lot," said Rawley still covering the mine owner with his gun. "First I'm goin' to steal every bit of money and gold yuh've got from yuh. Then I'm goin' to cripple you with bullets. Shoot a man in the right place in the leg and he don't ever walk good after that. Same thing if yuh hit him in the arm just right—makes that arm kind of useless afterward."

"Bluff, nothing but bluff," said Fenton, but he didn't sound at all certain. "When is all this going to happen?"

"That's what yuh'll find the hard part

of it," said Rawley. "You won't ever know just when I will start."

He glanced beyond Fenton. Sunlight streamed in through the windows of the office. Through the open doorway Rawley could see a big iron safe. It was closed and there was a combination dial on it. That safe interested Buck Rawley quite a bit.

Fenton's gun had dropped close to the right side of Rawley's horse. With his gun in his left hand, the waddy leaned down from the saddle to pick up the Colt. Fenton thought he saw his chance and he lunged at Rawley from the doorway. Rawley saw him coming as he swung back up in the saddle. He hit Fenton with the barrel of the mine owner's gun and knocked him flat.

"I owed yuh that," Rawley said, thrusting Fenton's gun into his belt and sticking his own Colt back into the holster. "Be seein' yuh." But Fenton didn't answer. He was still stunned by the blow.

Rawley picked up his reins and rode away fast, getting out of range before Fenton could scramble to his feet, rush into the office and find another weapon.

"Now there's a feller who don't really know what is goin' to happen next," muttered Rawley as he went ripping deep into the brush some distance away from the mine. "Acted like he believed what I told him about cripplin' him for life, too, which was more than I did."

Rawley had eaten breakfast before he left the Bar M. Jeff Lee had even fixed a bundle of food that the waddy now carried in his saddle roll. He waited until noon, hidden back in the brush and then ate again and washed the meal down with water from a stream.

That afternoon Rawley rode to Red Gulch. In the town he found the sheriff and talked to the lawman for some time. Sheriff Matt Lang finally nodded.

"Might work at that," Lang said. "We shore got to have proof before I can do anythin'."

A little later Rawley rode out of town. He headed south across the valley toward the Acme Mine. It was dark when he reached the mine. Leaving his horse hidden back in a clump of trees, he approached the mining office building on foot. The office was dark and there was no sign of Fenton anywhere around. Rawley decided that the mine owner had probably gone to town.

THE door of the office was locked on the outside with a flimsy looking padlock. Rawley broke the lock with a heavy blow of his gun butt, opened the door and entered the office. Then he struck a match, found an oil lamp on a desk and lighted it.

He went to the big safe, tried the handle and found it was locked. He scowled and looked around the office. He had to get that safe open and see what was inside. A box of dynamite was on the floor in one corner. Some distance away was another box that contained dynamite fuse caps.

"Shore careless the way they keep explosives around here," said Rawley. "But also right handy for me."

He got three sticks of dynamite, and a fuse cap. He found some long fuse cord. He ran this around the safe near the top. Then he fastened the dynamite sticks right beside the upper hinge of the safe. He attached the fuse cap to one of the sticks.

"It may just blow the hinge off," Rawley muttered as he worked. "Or it may blow up the whole office. Can't be certain what dynamite will do."

He was so intent on what he was doing that he did not see the big man who stepped silently through the open doorway. Rawley struck a match and lighted the short fuse on the dynamite cap.

"Got yuh!" snapped Fenton as he grabbed the gun out of Rawley's holster from behind the waddy. "You weren't so smart this time."

Rawley swung around as Fenton moved to one side. The waddy grabbed the big man's gun arm with both hands, gave a heave and Fenton went flying over the waddy's shoulder to land on the floor of the office. The gun in Fenton's hand roared as the big man was tossed around by Rawley, the bullet flying harmlessly out through the door. The fall knocked the weapon from Fenton's hand.

Rawley snatched up the gun, then glanced at the fuse. It was burning fast. He holstered the gun, grabbed Fenton by the shoulders and dragged him out of the office.

A moment later there was a deafening explosion as the dynamite went off. The building shook and smoke rolled out of the doorway. When the smoke had drifted away Rawley peered inside. The

(Concluded on page 85)

John swung his oar like a bat and clipped Logan on the side of the head with it

BANDY LEGS

By RICHARD BRISTER

When it was a case of fight, run or perish, little John McDougall proved even an Easterner could win through!

THE sandy-haired, bandy-legged little man perched precariously atop the rickety ladder as he nailed the neatly lettered sign to the new building.

GENERAL MERCHANDISE
Dry Goods—Sundries
J. McDougall, Prop.—Portal, Nebraska

Descending the ladder, he stepped back to survey his handiwork with a gleam of sharp pride in his mild blue eyes, for here in the fine, big, new store was the crystallization of the hopes and dreams he had so long carried close to his heart.

"How's she look, Charley?" he asked the lanky, red-bearded giant beside him.

"Good," said the giant, grinning and rubbing a calloused hand across a tobacco-stained cheek. "Jim-dandy, I'd say."

John McDougall smiled softly. "Sure you don't want that job clerking for me? Can't pay a whole lot to start, but the

work'd be steady."

"I'm a carpenter, John," replied the red-bearded man, thrusting his barrel chest forward. "I'd never stick it, workin' indoors. But I'm thankful to yuh for the suggestion." He grinned around his cud of tobacco. "Open for trade now, are yuh? I'd admire to shove the first dollar acrost yore counter, John. I could use me some chawin' tobacco."

"Come along," John said. He grinned happily and would have led the big fellow inside had not a rasping voice hailed him.

"Hold up a minute, McDougall."

John swung his small body toward the sound in a precise little pivot. It was Clute Johnson. Johnson was a tall, bony gent with drooping, gorilla-like arms and a wedge-shaped face, half of which was disfigured by a hairy, brown birthmark. He came up the plank walk now, limping a little.

JOHNSON had the only other dry goods store in this mushrooming boom town on Nebraska's Platte River, but rumor had it that the big man hadn't always earned his living by peaceful trading. It was said here in Portal that Johnson's crooked leg was a memento of a brush with the law, down in Kansas, and that he had packed his outlaw guns in mothballs when the shattered leg healed, then had used the stake he had saved up following crooked trails to go into a healthier line of endeavor.

John wasn't one to set much stock in rumors. He neither liked nor disliked Clute Johnson from his short acquaintance with the man so far. He kept his voice neutral.

"What's on your mind, Johnson?"

The man fingered the birthmark that stained his thin cheek and stared contemplatively at the new store.

"Pretty," he said softly. "By heck, she's right pretty, McDougall. Makes my place look tired." There was a hard edge on his voice as he finished.

John's blue eyes came up sharply. Six weeks ago, when he had stepped off the river boat at the Portal landing, he had at once sensed the power for growth in this town. He had talked with James Hartwell, the local banker and one of the town's founding fathers, and had driven a rig into the country beyond the town and gazed at lush farms, at fine cattle grazing. He had compared this year's population count with that of the year preceding and had then agreed with James Hartwell that this town was earmarked for greatness, that it would some day be a flourishing city.

"Guess I've found what I've been looking for, Hartwell," he'd told the banker. "This town's going to grow like a mushroom. I'm going to put down some roots and try to grow with it."

"Fine," beamed the banker, at heart a boomer. "What kind of roots, McDougall. Farming? Or business?"

"I've been looking over Clute Johnson's general store," John admitted. "Seems to me he's asking a mighty stiff price for—"

"Hold up now," warned the banker. He shifted uneasily behind his big desk and held his eyes down. "Yuh're not thinkin' of tryin' to open another general store in Portal, McDougall?"

"Any law against it?" John asked simply.

"Ain't any law in Portal yet, McDougall. That's the main trouble. Yuh take a man with Clute Johnson's background —well, I just wouldn't cross him. Now, I'm mighty eager to see this town grow, and I'd like to see yuh set down here with us, son. But why set up a new general store? This town needs a hardware. And a good hotel-restaurant. And a barber."

"And a *good* general store," John said pointedly. "With an up-to-date stock of goods and fair prices, based on a fair profit margin."

"I can see yuh're dead set on it, son," sighed the banker, and let his soft hands plop down on the desk. "As yuh say, there's no law against it. Well, I wish yuh luck. And, son—if yuh run into trouble with Clute, remember I warned yuh!"

John had done better than that. The blood of the proverbially canny Scot flowed within John McDougall, and simple logic sent him from the banker's office direct to Clute Johnson. The surest way to defeat an approaching crisis was to prevent it entirely, and he spoke straight out to Johnson.

"I'm thinking of opening a store here in town, Johnson. It's been said that you might try to make trouble."

Clute Johnson's eyes came up slowly. "General store?"

"That's my line."

There was a pregnant pause, during

which the thin man's black eyes carefully took his number. "Go ahead," he said, pleasantly enough.

John had been looking for hard words between them, at the very least a minor scene. The placidity of the bony merchant surprised him, and pleased him.

"Hope we'll get along all right, Johnson. No reason we shouldn't. 'Course, we'll be in direct competition once I've opened my place. But that won't matter much, the way this town's expanding. My name's McDougall."

He was surprised at the warmth of Clute Johnson's handclasp. "Luck to yuh, McDougall."

It was the second time he had been wished luck in his venture, within the hour, and he recalled the parting words of Hartwell, the banker: "... if yuh have trouble with Clute, remember I warned yuh."

HE was remembering now, as he heard the hard edge in Johnson's voice, and as the thin man with the disfiguring birthmark stared at his new store and muttered, "Makes my place look tired."

"That's because it's new," John said, half-apologizing. "In a year or two, you won't recognize it."

Clute Johnson looked at him shortly. "All stocked up and ready to open, hey, McDougall?"

John nodded. There was something in the man's manner which he didn't cotton to. He could not quite put his finger on the thing, or analyze it. A certain aggressiveness, which reminded him of those ugly rumors about Clute Johnson's background.

"Mind if I look?" Johnson murmured.

John cast a short glance toward the red-bearded giant whose carpentering wizardry had largely created the new building before them.

"Mind dropping back a bit later, Charley?" he asked, and the big fellow shrugged in agreement. John led Clute Johnson into the store and watched his competitor's face doubtfully as Johnson sized up the shelves and showcases full of shiny, new stock.

"Neat," Johnson said, nodding, and with that same hard inflection in the tone of his voice. "Yuh've put a lotta thought into this place, McDougall. And experience, I'd say. This ain't yore first store, that's plain to see."

"I had a small place in Philadelphia," John admitted. "Came to this country from Aberdeen, Scotland, nine years ago, Johnson. I had a small stake and built up a middling fair trade in the city. But the competition was mighty stiff. I wasn't getting ahead fast enough to pay for the effort. That's why I sold out and came west. This country's growing fast. I mean to grow with it."

"Small men," said Clute Johnson, smiling down at him, "come sort of impatient."

"I left my wife and children back east, Johnson, till I can set up a decent home for them out here. Sure I'm impatient. I've got good reasons. Three of them."

"Yuh also got somethin' else, McDougall."

John frowned upward at him. "What?"

"Bad news comin'."

"Bad news?"

Clute Johnson smiled thinly, without humor. "I like this place yuh got here, McDougall." He fondled the brown stain on his cheek, let his eyes rove around the big room. "Well-built. Solid. Neat, clean, and everything in its proper place. Orderly, that's what. I like it, McDougall. Shows imagination."

John's blue eyes on Johnson's lean face never flickered.

"That place of mine, now—it ain't much," the thin man went on. "Originally built for a house. Rickety. Too small for my stock, and the roof's begun leakin' like a sieve already. I'm gettin' mighty sick of it, I tell yuh. But this place—" his black eyes rolled in admiration "—this here's more like it."

What was the man getting at? John wondered fretfully. "Well, I'm glad you like it," he said quietly.

"I do better than like it, McDougall. I want it. I'm goin' to buy it."

John's eyes bored at the bony, disfigured face, trying to read through the mask Johnson presented. "If that's a josh, Johnson," he snapped out shortly, "it's not very funny."

"Ain't joshin', McDougall," the tall man said, smiling blandly. "I want this place, and I sure mean to have it. Been watchin' close this past six weeks, while yuh was puttin' her up. Yuh sure built her pretty. I'm a direct kind of man, McDougall. I come down here with business in mind, and here's to prove it." He pulled a long, rectangular slip of

paper from the pocket of his black town coat and handed it over.

It was a check on James Hartwell's bank, John saw instantly. The arrogant devil had actually had the presumption to make out a check drawn to his order, assuming, because he wanted the place, that the deal was as good as completed.

JOHN felt a pulse of blood pound hard at his temple when he read the amount of the offer. "Four thousand dollars," he whispered. "Four thousand! Why, man, you must be plain crazy! Of all the high-handed nonsense I ever heard of, this takes the prize!"

"That's my offer, McDougall." Johnson's voice had turned brittle. "I figure yuh're goin' to take it."

"Now wait a minute," spluttered John, his tiny fists clenching. "You talk like an idiot, hear me? In the first place, I'm not selling. I never broke my back building and stocking this place for you to take over. In the second place, my stock alone set me back more than four thousand." His voice choked off as a thought occurred to him. "What kind of a game are you playing, Johnson? Was this why you encouraged me to go ahead?"

"Yuh'll find," Clute Johnson said meaningly, "that we don't go in much for games out this-away, McDougall. Mebbe yuh ain't caught on yet to the fact this here's a frontier country. Ain't no law out here yet, except what a man chooses to lay down for his ownself. Me, now, I used to tote the law around with me, in a pair of tied-down gun holsters. But here lately, I've give up the habit.

"I'm willin' to talk things out with a man, peaceful and friendly, so long as he don't rear back on his high heels and get ornery with me," Johnson continued. "That there's my personal check for four thousand dollars, McDougall. Yuh can go down to Jim Hartwell's bank, any time yuh're so minded and collect yore money. I understand yuh've took out a registered deed on this place. I come here to get it."

A wild, gurgling laugh escaped past John's clenched teeth. He took the man's check in his two small hands and methodically ripped it to shreds.

Clute Johnson's disfigured face twisted with sudden anger. He was breathing heavily as he stared down at John.

"I was kinda hopin' yuh'd do that, McDougall," he said softly.

"You're standing on my property, Johnson," John said shortly. "There's a sawed-off, double-barreled shotgun over there in back of my counter. Get out!"

Johnson showed yellow-stained teeth against the brown of his birthmark. "Yuh're goin' to wish yuh'd never tore up that check, McDougall," he warned.

"Get out!" John snapped coldly.

"Peppery fer a little man, ain't yuh?" Johnson suddenly stepped forward, limping, and reached a talonlike arm out toward him. John scampered back and grabbed a heavy pitchfork from a rack of farm implements beside the counter, jabbing it at the tall man.

"Move, Johnson," he said. "The door's wide open and waiting."

Johnson muttered something under his breath and glared at the little man.

"Move!" John snapped at him, and sent the sharp-pointed tines briskly forward, toward the taller man's darkened face.

Johnson retreated slowly toward the door and backed through it. John followed grimly, the brandished pitchfork an ever-present threat to the other.

There was a clique of idlers out on the plank walk, and rather than make a spectacle of himself before these fellow-townsmen, the merchant suddenly turned his back on John, and limped away swiftly.

"Yuh've just bought yoreself a whole heap of trouble, McDougall," was the last thing John heard him say.

A week later, in the office of Hartwell, the banker, Clute Johnson spoke harshly. "I want that place, Hartwell, and I mean to have it. Yuh goin' to string along on this thing, or am I goin' to have to parade yore past in front of yuh?"

The banker tugged at his plump cheek with one harried white hand. "Clute, yuh're goin' crazy. Crazy for power."

"Never mind the sermon," Johnson said. "I want that place. That crazy little Philadelphia pilgrim's only been open a week and he's took pretty near all my trade from me already. I won't have it, Hart. I—"

"Sh-h-h," breathed the banker, with a quick glance at the door of his office, "don't call me that here, Clute. If anyone was to connect the name with the old days back in Kansas, why I'd be finished."

Clute Johnson laughed shortly. "Nervous type, ain't yuh? If yuh ask me, yuh

was a better man when yore name was Jack Hart and we was robbin' stages together."

"Not so loud, Clute," groaned the banker, swiping his forehead with the back of one soft hand. "Forget about that stuff altogether, will yuh?"

"Sure," Johnson agreed, grinning coldly. "When yuh say yuh'll throw in and help me get rid of that doggone little pilgrim. The nerve of that little coyote, usin' a pitchfork on Clute Johnson. If I was totin' a gun, I'd of drilled him."

"Clute, yuh're too rash. Too bloodthirsty. Always were. We've got a good thing here now. And yuh've got to control that hot temper of yore's."

"*You've* got a good thing, yuh mean," Johnson corrected bitterly. "Honest Jim Hartwell, the go-gettin' young banker. Wouldn't them dumbhead farmers raise a holler if they knowed it was really Jack Hart safekeepin' their money! You stringin' along, Hart, or do I have to start droppin' a few hints about yore past?"

"Clute, I've been straight for six years now. What—what do yuh mean to do to McDougall?"

"Get rid of him. What else?"

"Clute, I won't be a party to any more killin'."

"Don't talk like a fool. Who mentioned killin'? We're respectable business men now. Our thievin's turned lawful. Yuh're speculatin' in boom town land with yore depositors' money, and I been price-gougin' a fortune out of 'em on dry goods. Until that bandy-legged little Scotchman popped up to ruin my game. We got to work it slick and careful, because we got to keep the good will of this town or we're through, Hart. There's no way to force the suckers to buy my stuff or put their dough in yore bank. I ain't fool enough to risk what I've got here by killin' McDougall. He's made hisself too many friends . . ."

"But if he refuses to leave, and yuh're not goin' to kill him—"

"He refuses, so far," Johnson cut in. "What he needs is persuadin'. And I got the boys that can do it."

"Logan and Burks?" Though the day was hot, the stout banker shivered.

"Them two'll make him say 'Time,'" Johnson said, laughing harshly, "and they'll enjoy the job while they're at it. Main trouble is gettin' him out of town without causin' a ruckus. I don't want nobody to know what the game is. Get him out of town quietly and let the boys work him over, that's all I want. Then when he comes tail-draggin' in, he'll be only too glad to sell his place out to me and line out for Philly."

"But if he talks before he leaves, he could ruin us."

"He'll be too scared to talk by the time them two get through with him."

"Clute, it's no good," Hartwell said. "When the town sees the marks on him, and realizes yuh've had those two hardcases workin' on him, they'll be after yore scalp."

"Won't be no marks. There's ways to hurt a man without leavin' telltale marks on him. Logan and Burks know their trade good enough to manage that part, I reckon. So far as the town'll know, the pilgrim just got cold feet and sloped out, kind of sudden. Nobody'll suspect our part in it."

THE banker's plump hands twitched. "I haven't come in on this thing yet, Clute. Doggone it all, I'm not goin' to either. I've been straight for six years now and I like the feel of it. No more runnin' from the law for me."

"How much of my money is in that tin can safe of yore's outside there, Hart?" Johnson asked slyly, seeming to ignore Hartwell's refusal to go along with him.

"About forty thousand," the banker said uncomfortably. "Why?"

"Get it."

"But—"

"Get it, Hart," Johnson ordered calmly. "I'm withdrawin', that's all."

"Clute, it'll take all our cash-on-hand to make up that kind of a kitty. Yuh want to start a run on the bank and throw me out of business?"

"This here is Saturday, Hart," said Johnson. "Won't be no run on yuh till Monday mornin', likely. Get my money. I'm stashin' it in my office safe over the week end. You string with me and do what I want and I'll deposit that money again before yuh open on Monday. Otherwise—well, these lunkhead farmers ain't like to take it kindly, you speculatin' in land with their hard-earned dollars. Yuh'd look right pretty on the end of a lynch rope, Hart."

The banker winced. "Clute, yuh—yuh wouldn't."

"I'm askin' yuh for my money," John-

son said coldly.

"What do yuh want me to do, Clute?" groaned the banker.

"Now that's the way I like to hear the canary bird sing," Johnson said, rubbing his hands. "The thing about this pilgrim, now—he'll trust you, Hart. A couple smart lads like us oughta be able to work that up for somethin', don't yuh think?" The thin man grinned, his yellow teeth showing like an uneven row of corn kernels. . . .

Hartwell's voice was oily, persuasive. "Prettiest spot in the world, McDougall. Yuh could look for days and never hope to locate yoreself a prettier home site."

"On the edge of the lake, you say, Hartwell?" John McDougall asked. "How much lake frontage to it?"

"Three hundred feet. And crawlin' with timber. The cabin's a mite run down, but with the lumber so handy, fixin' her up wouldn't cost much to speak of. The minute those settlers defaulted on their mortgage and the bank took the property over, I thought of yuh, McDougall. Yuh're goin' to be an important man in this town some day. And, of course, I knew yuh were eager to locate, so yuh could send for yore family."

"Why, that was mighty thoughtful of you, Hartwell." The little Scotchman was pleased. The friendship of a successful banking man was a precious commodity to a man starting in business. "Sure would like to see it, but I'm afraid to walk out of here for even an hour or so and leave my place unprotected. Clute Johnson swore he'd make trouble for me, and—"

"Clute?" The banker laughed. "Don't worry about him. His bark's a lot worse'n his bite, McDougall."

"Maybe, but I still hate to leave the place alone."

"Yuh're tossin' up a wonderful chance to buy a nice property dirt cheap," prodded Hartwell. "Look, suppose yuh slide out of town on the quiet. I'll meet yuh with my rig up at North Fork, and who's to know yuh ain't still here, protectin' the store?"

"It's a thought," mused John softly. Hartwell was kind in making this offer, and he knew it would not be a wise policy to turn down the favor. Besides, the place sounded ideal, from the standpoint of Margaret and the youngsters. Maybe, this way, he could send for them sooner than he'd anticipated.

"It's Sunday," said Hartwell. "Clute's not likely to make trouble for yuh on the Lord's day, McDougall."

This final argument was unnecessary. "I'll go along for a look-see, Hartwell," John said. "Be glad to."

It was on the edge of No Bottom Lake, and jouncing up the dirt lane toward the cabin, John had to admit he never had seen a prettier home site. It was heavily wooded. The dirt underfoot was a golden brown, sloping down gently toward the clear, shimmering lake where a rickety rowboat jostled spasmodically against a rotting landing.

"Whose boat?" John wondered aloud.

"Previous owners'. Reckon that'd go with the deal, McDougall. Shall we look at the cabin?"

Hartwell keyed the door open and stepped aside courteously to let John enter before him. It was dank and dark inside, and as the little man moved cautiously across the worn floorboards, trying to adjust his eyes, he felt a hard object nudge his chest. He thought he had walked against the corner edge of a high shelf, for an instant.

Then he heard the harsh breathing of someone there in the dark and stood stock still, his heart pounding in a sharp crescendo. He lifted an exploratory hand toward the object which was nudging his chest.

John froze where he stood. Behind him, the bantering voice of Clute Johnson said softly, "Light up that coal oil lamp, Burks, and let the pilgrim see what he's walked into."

SOMEWHERE in the dark room a lucifer match scraped noisily. Flame guttered up from the wick of a smoky lamp on a rickety table. John stared down numbly at the long, glinting barrel of the Colt's six-shooter which was pressed against his stricken chest. The hard-eyed bristle-chinned man grinning wickedly behind the gun was a stranger to him, as was his wolf-faced sidekick, the man Clute Johnson had addressed as Burks.

John swallowed thickly. "What's this all about, Clute?"

"Comin' from a man with a gun stuck into his ribs," said Johnson, "that ain't such a smart question, pilgrim. Set him down and hold that gun on him, Logan. Come on outside, Hart. I want to talk to yuh."

John heard clumping footfalls as Clute Johnson went outside with the banker. Johnson had called Hartwell "Hart," and on the surface of things, that seemed rather strange. Hartwell seemed a dignified sort, yet Johnson acted mighty familiar with him.

And then it came to him. Hartwell and Johnson had worked this thing together. The banker had been the Judas sheep leading John to the slaughter!

And a slaughter it would be, he knew with a sharp thrust of panic, to judge by the tone of Johnson's voice and by the woolfish sneers of these two hardcase hombres who were riding herd on him.

John did a foolish, emotional thing then. He snapped out at the gun Logan was pointing at him, knocked it aside, and attempted to knee the taller man in the stomach. To that end, he succeeded, but Logan, raging, wrapped bearlike arms around him and pinned him securely.

"Crazy little fool!" the gunman snorted. "Doggone it, Burks, do somethin'! He's worse'n an armful of squirrels. Nail him!"

John heard the other men crossing the room in three lumbering strides. Something heavy and hard smashed down on his head. Pinwheels of light danced weirdly before his blinded eyes, then he sagged down limply in Logan's big arms, his chin sagging. . . .

"The devil!" Johnson swore. "I might of known yuh'd make a mess of things! I told yuh to get him out here without lettin' anyone see you two together."

"I couldn't help it," said the banker. "It was just that one farmer that saw us. Bill Jannsen. What'd yuh expect me to do—drive off the road and show McDougall what the game was? He's no fool, Clute."

"He's no nothin'," snapped Johnson shortly. "Not when the boys get through with him."

"Clute, yuh're not goin' to kill him? Yuh said—"

"What I said when I needed yuh, Hart, and what I say now, ain't the same things, exactly. Sure, I'm goin' to kill him."

"No, Clute! Not that!" The banker was sweating. "I beg of you, don't do it."

Clute Johnson stared disgustedly at him. "Yuh used to have some sand, Hart. But yuh've gone soft as butter, runnin' that bank. Never did trust a soft man, noways."

Hartwell gulped. His eyes popped with sudden fright. "Clute, I wouldn't talk. I don't like it, but if that's what yuh're set on doin', I sure wouldn't squeal on yuh."

"Let's see," mused Johnson softly. "You was seen leavin' town with the pilgrim. Suppose yuh never come back, now, and they was to go over yore books at the bank tomorrow and find yuh was short forty thousand. Why, doggone me, Hart, if they wouldn't figure yuh'd took and absconded!"

"Clute! In the name of heaven, man, what are yuh thinkin' of?"

"Then," smiled Johnson softly, "when the pilgrim failed to show up, they'd figure—well, he was with you, last time anyone seen either of yuh. Mebbe he'd caught on what yuh was up to, and the pair of you'd fought, and you'd killed him. Or mebbe you'd both sloped out of these parts, and shared that bank money." Johnson chuckled. "And I'd buy that place of his for a song when it went up for auction."

"It's no good!" screamed the chalk-faced banker. "It'd never stick. Th—there'd be the bodies."

"That there's an all-fired deep lake, Hart. I hear tell a dead man won't float worth a shuck if yuh take and tie a good-sized rock onto him. And them fish could stand a change in their diet."

Johnson wore a bantering smile as he slowly pulled a snub-nosed .38 revolver from a shoulder holster. The unarmed banker cringed away from him, his pale eyes stricken. "Clute! Clute, you . . ."

THE GUN in Johnson's hand leaped like a striking snake. The harsh sound of its explosion thundered and volleyed among the jackpines and across the shimmering surface of the lake which, rumor said, had no bottom. Jack Hart, alias James Hartwell, struck the soft ground like a limp sack of potatoes.

Johnson holstered the gun and limped back into the cabin. His eyes narrowed, and he fingered the birthmark on his cheek when he saw the limp figure of John McDougall on the floor. "What happened?"

"The little son tried to jump my gun, boss. Burks had to gun-whip him."

Johnson stroked his bony chin for a moment. "Unwrap that baling wire from

around them stovepipes. Choose up a couple of hefty stones down at the lakeside. Haul that fool of a Hartwell, what's left of him, into the boat, along with the pilgrim. When yuh get out to deep water, tie them rocks on 'em and dump 'em . . . What yuh scroochin' yore ugly face up thataway for, Burks? Goin' chicken-heart', are yuh?"

"I can't swim, boss. That old boat's so rotten it—it don't look healthy."

"Cut out yore blasted caterwaulin' and get goin'!" Johnson snapped. "I'm goin' to snake back into town and try to make it look like I never rode out here. You two drift into my place around Wednesday and I'll pay yuh off, with mebbe a nice-sized bonus, providin' everythin' goes right."

"He turned on one heel and limped out of the cabin, then swore at the sight of Hartwell's rig and matched team of driving horses.

"Roll that rig of Hartwell's down under the water," he called back brusquely. "Destroy that monogrammed harness. I reckon you two'll know how to get rid of them big bays. And yuh can split the profits."

Johnson mounted his long-legged chestnut roan and spurred away swiftly. . . .

John opened one cautious eye and stared upward through the half-light of gathering dusk at the sweating face of the man named Burks. A savage pulse of pain drove at his temple. He closed the cautious eye and tried to gather his mixed thoughts together. He was well back in the stern of that rotten old rowboat he had seen out in front of the cabin. He could hear the creak of Burks' oars in the oarlocks and the dull swish of the lake water driving past him against the boat's tender hull.

He felt something cold and clammy against one inert wrist and reopened the eye to investigate. It was, he saw with a feeling of nausea, the dead body of Hartwell, sprawling limply against him.

Forward of Burks, in the prow, Logan was sitting. "Move them oars faster," he growled. "It's comin' on dark already. We got our work cut out, to tie them rocks on 'em and dump 'em afore nightfall."

John gritted his teeth, fighting the sick dread which passed through him. "Like a trapped rat," he thought angrily. "I'm like a trapped rat, and they're going to drown me."

He struggled against the burning ache in his head and tried to think clearly. Back in Scotland, as a boy, and again on the Schuylkill in Philadelphia, he had gained a smattering familiarity with small boats. He knew this boat's hull was rotten, that it would take little to pierce it. But a kick or a jab, or any overt action from him, would undoubtedly earn him a murderer's bullet. He moved cautiously, letting his hand drift in exploring small arcs across the boat's ribbed bottom.

There was, he knew, a wooden plug in most of these boats, so that they could be drained out on dry land without the need of turning them over. If he could find that plug. There! By Jasper, he had it! Cautiously, he worked the cork-like plug from side to side till it loosened. Then he pulled it out and moved his leg over the incoming fountain of lake water, effectively throttling the sound of its splashing.

Thirty seconds of this and the man Burks suddenly lifted wet feet. "What the devil!" he barked nervously. "This old boat's leakin'! What'd I tell yuh, Slim? Find that leak. I can't swim worth a minute.

"That so?" breathed John softly, and lifting one leg, he sent his heel crashing into Burks' frightened face. The man let go of the oars with a panicky snarl and toppled headlong over the gunwale.

JOHN was on his feet like a cat, ripping one of those long oars free of the oarlock. He saw Logan lifting a long-barreled gun, aiming carefully at him. John threw weight against the right side of the boat. The gun went off at precisely that moment. The slug whistled its song of death past his ear. He swung his oar like a bat and clipped Logan on the side of the head with it.

The man groaned and flopped into the water, sinking down out of sight. John watched the place, marked by fast-rising bubbles, for a full minute. Logan did not reappear on the surface. Nor did his non-swimming partner.

"Frightened fool probably smothered himself the first trip under," John thought, panting. Briefly, he debated the advisability of leaping in and trying to save one or the other of the killers. But by the time he had re-plugged the hole in the fast-settling boat and fished

one vagrant oar from the water, he knew it was too late to save either of them.

He picked Logan's wet six-shooter out of the water at the bottom of the boat and stuck it into his shirt. Then he bent his small back to the oars, and swung the half-submerged boat toward the cabin. . . .

John McDougall pulled James Hartwell's spanking big bays up sharp in front of a crude log house on the outskirts of Portal. A lanky, red-bearded giant appeared in the doorway and squinted hard at him.

"McDougall! John McDougall, what in Cain's happened to yuh? Yuh look like a drowned rat, man. Where'd yuh leave Banker Hartwell? That's his rig, ain't it?"

"Hartwell's dead, Charley," John said bitterly.

"Is he, now? And how did it happen, laddie?"

Swiftly, while the carpenter gaped in astonishment, John sketched in the whole story. "I'm heading for Clute Johnson's place," he concluded grimly, "and see an end to this thing right now."

"John, don't be goin' off half-cocked, now. Clute'll be too much for yuh. He'll eat yuh fer breakfast, sure as the devil made such men as him."

"It's like he said," John shrugged bitterly. "There's no law in this land yet, except what a man lays down for himself. If it's a case of fight or be driven into the ground, my vote goes for fighting. I wanted somebody to have the facts, Charley, in case—well, in case he's as good as you say."

"John, yuh can't do this. It's plain crazy. He'll kill yuh."

"My whole life is in that store, Charley," John said. "Clute's meant to have it from the beginning. He would have killed me. I'm going to have it out with him." He clucked to the bays.

Charley leaped to the seat beside him. "Man, yuh're fair burnin' to kill somethin', ain't yuh? Reckon I'll just string along and see fair play done. Yuh've a gun, I take it."

John murmured his gratitude for the big fellow's support and showed the gun he had fished out of the rowboat. He had dried it out on his shirt and checked the cartridges, which Logan had conveniently, as it turned out, greased against moisture.

"Ever used a gun?" prodded doubtful Charley.

"Took part in some May Day shoots back home in Scotland," John murmured. "I'm not the plucked pigeon I look. Whoa down, horses! There's Clute's already. He's got a light burning." He pulled in on the bays and the rig creaked to a halt across the shadowy street from Clute's store.

John felt a moment of indecision now that the climactic moment had finally come. Perhaps he was a fool, pitting his fledgling talent for gun-fighting against a man who had once been an outlaw. As a family man, he knew he ought to consider Margaret and the children. But there were times when a man had to fight, to carry the battle to an opponent or evidently perish. And if that wasn't sufficient spur to his courage, he could always remember how Johnson had intended to dispose of him. He felt a brittle rage come to life in him.

He cupped his small hands. "Clute! Clute Johnson!" he yelled hoarsely.

A SHADOW passed over a window in Johnson's place, then the front door swung inward and Johnson stood framed there, peering out anxiously in an attempt to distinguish John's face.

"Get clear, Charley," John whispered, resting a hand on the butt of the gun in his belt. "Get clear. I think he sees me."

But Johnson's eyes were not that good, not in such a poor light and at such a distance. He came down his front steps, squinting a little, and then he made out the shape of the rig.

"Logan and Burks!" he suddenly snarled. "Why, you crazy fools! Thought I told yuh to run that rig under water!"

"Evenin', Clute," John said softly.

"Who's that?" Johnson stood like a snowman, motionless. "Speak up! Who's here?"

"McDougall!"

John had to admire the man in this terrible moment. The unbelievable was here coming to life before Clute Johnson's eyes, but the man's instinct for survival supported him well through the crisis.

"Why," he said, "that's pretty. A real pretty kettle of fish, I'd say." And then his hand blurred in a frenzied stab at the gun within his black town coat.

John was tugging Logan's heavy Colt from under his belt, but he knew he could never hope to match the speed of Johnson's kill-crazy reflexes. With his free hand, John slapped the reins against the horses' rumps smartly. The rig leaped forward as the surprised bays strained in the harness, precisely as Clute Johnson snapped his first shot out. John leaped to the ground on light, bandy legs and triggered a snap shot at the taller man, then stepped nimbly aside.

Clute shot again, and John's arm hung limp beside him as he watched the other stagger drunkenly toward him, trying to lift his gun. John aimed very carefully at the man's chest and pulled the trigger.

He saw the brilliant orange flash split the air between him and Clute Johnson, saw the man buck as the slug smashed him head on.

Johnson clapped a wavering hand to his chest, and came limping forward, still trying to lift his gun.

"Blast yore hide, McDougall!" he growled. "I'll get yuh yet."

He took one more limping step, then fell headlong into the dusty street.

Some days later a sandy-haired, bandy-legged little man with a bandaged left arm sat down at a fine oak desk and hastily scribbled the following letter:

Dear Margaret:

Well, darling, the time has come. Everything's ready and waiting out here for you and the children. Take the train to Omaha, and the steamer will bring you up the Platte River.

I am afraid your husband is not such a good correspondent. There's been quite a lot happening here, but everything seems to work to our advantage. Our local banker unfortunately "passed on" since my last letter, and darling, will you believe it? The townspeople have asked me to step into his shoes and run the bank. They seem to hold your husband in some high regard—for what earthly reason I'll never tell you!

So now you're the wife of a man of influence. Are you smiling?

By the way, the store is doing a land-office business. Our competitor has also passed on, poor fellow.

I'm afraid I must close. My work calls me. But do come post-haste to your

Always loving,
John.

P. S.—This seemed a rather wild town when I arrived here. But it's quieter now and has, I think, a great future.

TOO SMART FOR HIS OWN GOOD

(Concluded from page 75)

dynamite had blown off the hinge of the safe, but that was about all it had done.

"Get up!" Rawley snapped, covering Fenton with his gun. "We're goin' to see what you've got in the safe, Fenton. I'll pry the door all the way open with a crowbar."

"You'll find the money I got from the holdups there," said Fenton wearily as he got to his feet. "The mine has been played out for the last two months. I just had to have money so I started those robberies. Made a mistake when I followed you and robbed you last night, Rawley. Guess that was one time when I was too smart for my own good."

"You shore were, Fenton," said Sheriff Lang as he and a couple of deputies stepped out of the shadows outside the building. "Rawley figgered you might admit everything if yuh thought yuh were alone with him, and he was right. He saw me this afternoon and asked me to be here tonight watchin' and listenin'." The lawman smiled. "We saw and heard plenty."

"You were right, Rawley," Fenton said. "You have been unlucky for me." He frowned as he stared at the waddy. "But what made yuh so anxious to prove that I really stole the Bar M payroll?"

"First because yuh made it look bad for me," said Rawley. "And second because we ain't been paid yet. I can use my money—aim to buy me a new saddle when I get paid!"

●

COMING NEXT ISSUE

THE STEEL TRAIL

A Railroad Novelet by NELS LEROY JORGENSEN

Budge rocked Wyatt with an uppercut and then sent him staggering back with a solid right

BROAD SHOULDERS

By CLIFF WALTERS

Lazy Budge Hale didn't cotton to steady work or fighting, but when trouble came along he was right there to meet it!

FOR nearly an hour big Budge Hale, sandy-haired, thirty and mild of manner, had sat on the counter of the general store in Linkville, while "Dad" Henderson, the plump proprietor laboriously, painfully checked over invoices for a load of freight that had arrived yesterday.

Henderson was frowning through his spectacles and mumbling, "Two and two's four . . . and five's nine."

"That's right, Dad," Budge Hale agreed during the pause.

"As if you'd know, you ignoramus," the storekeeper snapped irritably. "You was probably asleep most of them three years you went to the Linkville school. If you're goin' to set there by the hour, with your two hundred pounds bendin' my dry goods counter, at least keep still."

Grinning, the sturdy-shouldered loafer lapsed into silence for another ten minutes.

Then lanky, gray-haired Tom Clark, the town's only lawyer, entered the store,

to buy a quarter's worth of cigars.

"You know, Dad," he said, "every time I look at Budge, I think of that big waterfall up in Deep Canyon." The attorney nodded toward the mountains.

"How come?" Henderson demanded, blinking.

Clark looked at Budge Hale's ample body. "I keep thinking of all that power going to waste."

"You're right," the storekeeper said. "Do you s'pose we could shame him into a little action by remindin' him of the truth—that he's worse'n his father, old Smoky Hale, was. Old Smoky *would* get out and prospect a little, or pretend to. He'd even herd sheep when he got too hungry. Or thirsty. But Budge here won't budge."

"Let's not be unduly harsh, Dad," said Clark, amused by Budge's discomfiture. "We must concede that young Mr. Hale helps out occasionally at the local blacksmith shop. Who knows but what, some day, this brawny lad with the stature of a rearing grizzly—and the mild disposition of a Newfoundland dog—might grow tired of sunning himself on the doorstep of Linkville? He might, even yet, go out and rustle up a steady job."

"No such luck, Tom," Henderson replied, shaking his bald head. "Two things Budge shies away from—steady work and fightin'."

Goaded until the hint of a spark had kindled in his serene blue eyes, Budge answered that.

"I'll be workin' tomorrow," he said. "Be up in the mountains cuttin' poles for that new corral the stablekeeper wants to build—if I can get credit for some grub."

"Credit—for grub?" Henderson swallowed hard. "I've often wondered if you wouldn't try openin' a charge account here some day, Budge. Well, as much as I'd like to accommodate you—and I know you'd pay me some time—I might not live forty more years to collect."

HEAVY boots came clumping through the open door of the store, and there was burly Jake Wyatt, a dark, slate-eyed man of formidable bulk who ran sheep on his range to the north of town.

"Howdy, Dad," Jake Wyatt said gruffly. "You, too, Clark. And even Mr. Hale—of the sheep-stealin' Hales!"

"Hold on, Jake," said Tom Clark gently. "Don't you think Budge is entitled to a more civil greeting than that? Maybe old Smoky Hale did lose a few sheep when he was herding for you just before he died, but I can't believe—"

"I say Smoky Hale stole ten head of my sheep. Sold 'em so he could grubstake himself for a prospectin' trip—or a spree. I accused him of that. And I still accuse him of it. Yeah, and if he hadn't died from swiggin' too much booze, I'd have collected out of his whisky-soaked hide! It still ain't too late yet to collect it out of the hide of any friend, or relative—" Wyatt's slate-gray eyes tossed a contemptuous look at husky Budge Hale "—who might want to take old Smoky's part."

"You sound like you might've stopped at the saloon 'fore you come here, Jake," said Dad Henderson timidly.

"Not too long to be able to take care of myself," said the brawniest man on the Bell Basin range. "It's enough to make a man hunt whisky. That half-asleep sheepherder of mine, Gus Parker, lettin' an old roan plug buck him off. And bust his arm."

"Old Gus didn't hire out for a bronc stomper," said Tom Clark. "And if you'll remember, Jake, I warned you when you swapped for that old roan the other day that he was a spoiled horse. And that you were foolish to trade your bay horse for that roan and the forty dollars you got to boot."

"I'll tend to my business," Wyatt replied cantankerously. "Is there any sheepherders around that can take Gus' place, Dad? I can't herd my own sheep. I've got work to do at my ranch. Hay to put up."

"I don't know of anybody you can hire right now," Henderson said.

There was a brief pause. Then, for the first time since Jake Wyatt's entrance, Budge Hale spoke.

"How much do you figure them ten head of sheep was worth, Wyatt?" he asked, rather timidly. "The ones that turned up missin' when Dad was herdin' for you?"

Jake Wyatt stared at the man on the counter. "About fifty dollars," he answered. "Why?"

"Well, I've paid off what few little debts Dad left," Budge Hale replied. "Perhaps you figured I could work out that debt by herdin' your sheep for a

month."

"Don't be a jackass, Budge!" Tom Clark said sharply. "You're not legally bound to—"

"Shut up, Clark," Jake Wyatt snapped. "I've told young Hale here to keep clear of my mountain range. Told him that, if he didn't, I'd give him a handlin' he'd never forget. And I would've, too! But now, since his heart seems to be in the right place—since he's makin' an offer to pay for the sheep his dad sold—"

"But he didn't sell them!" Clark interrupted. "Budge, the big lout, is being scared into this."

"Get out!" Jake nodded toward the door—and moved a menacing step toward Clark.

"I will not!" answered the elderly attorney, his eyes blazing. "You lay a hand on me, Wyatt, and you'll regret your rashness—I promise you that!"

"All right," said Wyatt, wise enough to realize that he might be standing on the brink of costly trouble. "Budge and me'll go out where we can talk alone. Come on, Hale."

Outside, by the hitching rack, Budge agreed to leave town, on Jake Wyatt's wagon, within the next ten minutes. If Wyatt would drive past the old cabin where Budge lived, down on the bank of Link Creek, Budge would have his bedroll ready.

"Be there!" Wyatt said. "You've made a proposition, Hale. And if you know what's good for you, you'll live up to it."

The sheepman headed for the saloon in front of which his team was tied. Budge Hale turned and walked back into the store. He tried to ignore the hostile gaze of Tom Clark and Dad Henderson. He laid a quarter on the counter and asked for five sacks of smoking tobacco.

"I'll make it ten sacks," said Dad Henderson coldly. "Since you're goin' into exile up on Granite Mesa for a month. Big Budge Hale—bein' scared into a month's slavery! Good gosh, Budge. I wonder how your broad back stays upright at all—with no spine to support it!"

BUDGE tried to grin. And couldn't. Not with the chill tone of Dad Henderson's voice biting at him. Not with old Tom Clark, grim-lipped, staring at him as if he were something that crawled.

"Imagine the big, shaggy, friendly Newfoundland turning sheep dog," said Tom Clark with glacial bitterness.

Budge turned quickly and left the store. His ears were burning with whip-like words that he would hear over and over again in a lonely sheepwagon on Granite Mesa, an altitudinous range, where sounded the tinkling of bells, where old Smoky Hale had once played shepherd. Smoky Hale, an improvident prospector, who had bequeathed to his sturdy son a ramshackle cabin at the edge of Linkville, a few samples of ore piled in the corner of that cabin. And, perhaps, the virtue of honesty, which Jake Wyatt so emphatically doubted.

Six long weeks of summer went by before Budge Hale returned to Linkville. Six long weeks before he walked, shabby and unshaven and grimed with dust, into the Linkville store where Dad Henderson was selling Tom Clark some fish hooks.

Customer and proprietor turned and stared at the newcomer.

"Look!" Dad Henderson said. "The slave-by-choice has escaped his bondage. I thought you were going to work only a month for Wyatt, Budge. And for nothing."

"It took him a couple extry weeks to find a new herder—he said," replied the husky young man, grinning.

"The longest stretch you ever worked in your life. And you haven't got enough cash to buy a sack of tobacco!" Dad Henderson gave a snort.

"That's right," Budge agreed affably. "Has anybody—a stranger—been in town lookin' for me, Dad? A stranger who must've lost his hair about the same time you did?"

"Nope," said the storekeeper, tossing a sack of tobacco on the counter. "But if there had been anybody lookin' for you, I'd figgered he was some official from the state insane asylum!"

"Come to think of it, there was a stranger asking about Mr. Hale last evening over at the hotel," said Tom Clark. "A rather heavy-set, well-dressed man who—There he comes now, crossing the street."

Budge went outdoors. He had gotten only as far as the store hitching rack when a rider came loping into town, and up to that rack. It was Jake Wyatt who swung down from a weary, spur-marked gray horse to impose his formidable bulk between Budge and the ap-

proaching stranger.

"What are you scowlin' about, Jake?" asked Budge. "Don't tell me that you've just found some of your sheep missin'. Me and the new herder—the one you *finally* brought out—counted 'em and they was all there."

"Something else is missin' from Granite Mesa, though, and from my sheep wagon," was the rumbled reply. "An old pair of field glasses. I warned you about takin' away anything that didn't belong to you."

"Them glasses *did* belong to me," Budge countered. "It was an old pair my mother had give to my dad one Christmas a long time ago. Dad forgot 'em, left 'em in your wagon when he was herdin' for you."

"When he was stealin' from me, the same way you're tryin' to steal!" Wyatt stormed. "You'll fork them glasses over to me, or I'll—"

"Dad didn't steal any sheep from you," Budge interrupted.

"No? If you hadn't been satisfied he did, and if you hadn't been afraid I'd collect that debt out of your yellow hide some day, you wouldn't've come crawlin' to me like a shipped sheep dog and offered to work the debt out."

Glancing at Dad Henderson and Tom Clark who had come out to the store porch, Budge said:

"Accordin' to old Frenchy Rebidaux, who still runs a few cattle the other side of Granite Mesa, you got awful tired of eatin' mutton one time, Wyatt. And decided to switch to veal for a little while. So, one night when you was goin' back to your ranch from your sheep camp, you range butchered a crippled calf belongin' to old Frenchy. And he caught you at it. To keep him from goin' to the law, you offered him a good trade—ten head of your best sheep for that crippled calf. And you throwed in a good saddle horse to boot—the sorrel that Frenchy still rides. That's how Dad, doin' a little prospectin' along with his sheep herdin', come up with ten head of woolies missin'."

Jake Wyatt seemed a little stunned. And not unlike a huge, rock-stiff statue as he stood there blinking at Budge Hale's calm, unhurried words. Words fraught with the ring of truth.

"Yeah—prospectin'!" Jake Wyatt finally blurted. "And you done the same thing up there on the mesa, you half-witted fool! You've staked claims up there. You think you're goin' to overrun my range with a bunch of locoed nugget chasers that ain't got no more sense than you or your whisky-soakin' old dad! You'll give me back them field glasses you stole from my camp. But first, I'll cram that range-butcherin' story down your throat!"

JAKE WYATT was no longer a statue. Slate eyes smouldering, big fists clenched in fury, he bore down upon Budge Hale and threw a haymaker aimed at Budge's grinning face. Budge ducked. Wyatt's fist shot over the mark and collided with the hitching rack post, a mistake that took toll of knuckle skin.

Budge Hale laughed. Jake Wyatt swore and rushed again. But Budge beat him to the punch this time. A solid left hook cracked to Wyatt's face. A swift-following right landed still harder. Wyatt was jolted up. The bigger man went insanely mad. And for a moment he swarmed all over Budge. But Budge weathered that attack, and rocked Wyatt with an uppercut to the face. Another blow to the body. Two more to the face, and a wrist-deep smash to the body.

Yells of encouragement broke from Dad Henderson and Tom Clark. And from a dozen other citizens who had longed to see someone stand up to mighty Jake Wyatt, citizens who had often expressed the desire to possess the splendid physique of Budge Hale—without, of course, his "yellowness." But now the same men who had taunted old Smoky Hale's son, and without realizing how deeply their verbal barbs had pierced, were now cheering for him.

Perhaps it was the sting of long-suffered barbs that spurred Budge Hale on now, giving him power to withstand the punishment meted out to him. And to mete out punishment in return, with cool savagery, blows hammering fiercely to Wyatt's dripping face and straining body.

Desperate, dangerous because of his great power, Jake Wyatt landed a blow that nearly felled Budge. The crowd groaned as they thought they were witnessing a quick change in the tide of battle. But Budge Hale warded off the next punch coming at him, and tore into the fray with a fury that beat a heavier antagonist, gasping and uncertain on his feet, into giving ground.

From that moment on, Wyatt was forced to retreat. Then he was no longer on his uncertain feet. He was weaving from a left to the face, and going down from a vicious right that caught him on the mouth. And the main street of Linkville became an uproar. Wyatt dropped and lay motionless.

"Budge, we're all proud of you!" whooped Dad Henderson, jumping down off the store porch and hurrying toward the victor of a battle which onlookers would never forget.

"That's right," agreed tall Tom Clark. "But what I can't understand is, if you *knew* your dad hadn't stolen any sheep from Wyatt, or if no sheep had even turned up missing, why in the dickens did you go out to Granite Mesa and herd Wyatt's woolies for six weeks? Certainly, deep down in your heart, you weren't afraid of Wyatt. You've just proved that."

"Ain't he, though!" yelled an exultant bystander.

"Maybe I was just curious, Tom," Budge said, flashing a warm, if slightly battered, smile. "Curious to know where a certain piece of ore down at my old cabin had come from. I kind of had a hunch it might've come from Granite Mesa. And it turned out to be pretty good ore—as I found out not too long ago when I sent a sample of it to Mr. McLory there, a minin' man that prospected with my dad one summer, years ago. Mr. McLory's got lots of money now. He told me if I could find a vein of that kind of ore, I'd be rich."

"And he did find it—up on Granite Mesa when he was herding sheep," said Fred McLory, chuckling. "I know. I was up there a couple days ago. And my company's paying Budge Hale enough for his claims that—well, he could buy quite a chunk of this little town. Maybe all of it."

Bystanders gawked. Some gasped a little. Tom Clark smiled.

"So *that's* why the big friendly dog, that suddenly turned grizzly, wanted Jake Wyatt to *invite* him out to range that had been, until recently, forbidden to him."

"That's right," said Budge. "But Mr. Wyatt's goin' to be awful sore when he finds out he's been herdin' his sheep over a gold mine all these years—without knowin' it. Come on, Tom. I need a good lawyer to draw up some papers for Mr. McLory and me. I'll pay you well for it."

He chuckled, turned to Dad Henderson. "I'll even pay you for that tobacco you gave me, Dad. And you won't have to wait forty years to collect, either."

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IN THE GALA SUMMER ISSUE OF

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The Cowboy HAD A WORD for it!

By CHUCK STANLEY

THE morning after the trail-drive moved out was a busy one for the old-timer and his young friend. They were up long before daylight, and attending to their chores with a real will. There was still a lantern light burning in the kitchen when they mounted their horses and set out to pick up the drive at the first overnight camp. The ranch owner had no objection to the "Arbuckle's" quest for knowledge but insisted that they be back by night-fall.

As they rode along, the old "mossy-horn" said:

"There's some things you're going to be able to see for yourself, son. But I don't reckon you're going to be able to learn much about how they bed them critters down for the night. Like we mentioned yesterday, it's the job of the 'trail boss' to figure out where his herd is going to 'bed down'. When he picks his spot, he waits for the boys to come along, and they usually reach him about an hour before sundown. He gives his signal and the 'point riders' begin a job that is known as 'throwing the herd'. Some folks call it 'throwing off the herd.'"

"Gosh," said the greenhorn, "what does that mean?"

"I reckon it does sound like something pretty drastic, but it isn't. It just means that they move the herd about half a mile or so off the trail, so they'll have better grass to 'bed down' in, and also to permit any following herd to go on by if it has a hankering to try it."

Riding Down a Herd

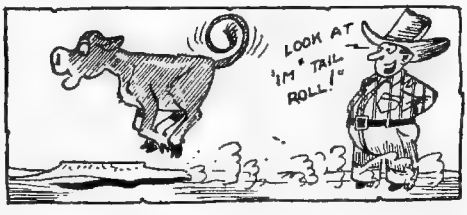
The "Arbuckle" then listened in fascination as he jogged along on his horse and the old "mavericker" explained the technique of "riding down" a trail herd. This was the job in which the point, flank, swing and drag riders all concentrated their attention on the job of bringing the "point" and the "drag" of the herd together as they approached the "bed-ground." "Bedding down" a fairly large herd was a job in itself, and one that had to be handled with skill and discretion. The animals could not be "bunched" in too small an area, or they would be restless throughout the night.

On the other hand, if they were scattered all over the landscape it would be a hopeless job to keep them under control.

Stampede Trouble

"How do they work if the herd does happen to stampede?" the greener asked.

"There are several ways of handling that," the old-timer declared. "For one thing, the origin of the word 'stampede' itself ought to be interesting to you. It comes from the Spanish word, 'estampida' meaning a loud noise, or a great crash. Generally something of this sort, such as a clap of thunder, a gun-



shot, shouting Indians, or the sounds of moving buffalo herds created the loud noise or great crash that started a stampede. Such noises seldom affected more than a small group of cattle at the outset, but the panic of these few animals was soon transmitted to their companions."

The "mavericker" then went on to explain how the cowboys described the cattle in a

Our Pilgrim Learns More Trail-Herding Lingo!

stampede as "rolling their tails." Most stampedes occurred at night and then it was necessary for the "night herders" to "cut in" the cattle and attempt to swing them back into a circle.

This was done by setting out "flankers" who rode the rim of the herd firing their six-guns, or flapping their ponchos to divert the attention of the cattle. The fleeing herd was finally shaped into a crude "U," and then the two ends were forced in on each other. This operation was described as "milling." The cattle were the animals who "milled."

Origin of "Rodeo"

The horse and rider who were mixed up in this nocturnal activity were said to be "rounding-in," and later on "rounding-up," from which two expressions came the "round-up," and our more familiar Spanish equivalent, the "rodeo."

Time passed rapidly as the old cowboy and his young companion jogged along. Dawn was coming up in the east behind them, and on the breezes that blew toward them from the west they could already hear the lowing sounds of the cattle, the clatter of the cook's tin pans, and the sounds of voices. Finally they came up over the edge of a swale, and saw the trail-herd below them.

"What a sight," remarked the youngster, impressed by the hundreds of cattle spread out before him.

The animals were scattered over a broad stretch of prairie, and at the far limits of the bed grounds there was the silvery breadth of a winding river. Several cowboys were riding along the near bank of the stream.

"Looks as though they watered along the river last night," the old-timer declared. "That's a job that has to be done right, too, son."

"How do you figure that out?" inquired the greenhorn.

"Well," explained the "mossy-horn," "you've got to slow down your herd before they hit the water so they won't 'stampede' on you. Then you fix it so that the head of the herd begins drinking downstream. This way the critters who come along behind won't have to drink the water that has been muddied up by their fellows. As other animals come to the river's edge they're 'hazed' upstream, always finding clear water in front of them."

Smart Thinking

"That's pretty smart thinking," admitted the "Arbuckle" as he made a note in his book. "I'd never be able to figure out anything like that."

By this time they were in camp, and the cookie pointed to the ever-ready coffee pot. While they were sipping a cup and resting their horses, the old-timer said:

"That slowing down the herd is a good idea any time. Like as not, if the river ain't too wide, some of them lead cattle would be forced plumb across to the other side before the drag came up. Then you'd have a lively time trying to gather your herd. No animal likes to swim the same river twice—much less three times, which he'd have to do in a spot like that."

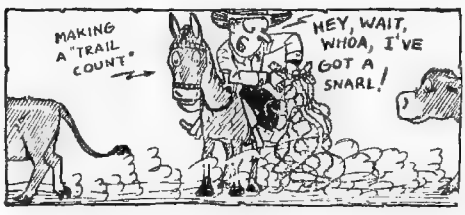
The cowboys on the trail drive greeted the pair with good humor, then turned to their serious tasks. The "greener" watched as the men stowed their bedrolls carefully in the chuck-wagon, roped out their horses from the "remuda" and set out on the job of moving the herd into formation. The lad's attention was taken by the trail boss and one of the waddies.

The Trail Count

They were mounted, and sitting their horses at a point on the trail leading down to the river ford. As the "trail hands" got the cattle into motion, they were "pushed" through between the two men.

"What's going on there?" the youngster wanted to know.

"Making a 'trail count'," the "mavericker" explained. "As the cattle are 'strung out' for the day's drive, the trail boss counts them, and his pardner does the same. As each hundred cows goes by, he ties a knot in a 'latigo' string or shifts a pebble from one pocket to the other. When the last cattle have



gone by, the trail boss checks with his amigo, and if they have an agreement, then they're satisfied. If they don't check, then they've got to go through the whole routine again."

"That's interesting," the "Arbuckle" remarked. But by this time another fascinating branch of trail-herding was in the making. This was the job of putting the cattle across the river. The old-timer noticed the direction of the youngster's glance and said:

"Now you're going to see something.

There's two kinds of water so far as a 'trail hand' is concerned. One of them is 'walking water', and the other one is 'swimming water.'

'Walking water' is water that is shallow enough to permit the animals to ford it with their four feet on solid ground all the time. Generally it's a pretty easy job to put a herd across such a stream. When you come up against 'swimming water,' however, it's another thing entirely."

"Why is that?" inquired the greenhorn.

"Well," laughed the mavericker, "it's one of those times when a cow critter is likely to try and prove why folks call him a dumb animal. When a cowboy came to a river ford, he always called it a 'crossing'. When the point riders reach one of these, like up ahead here, they start their point animals out into the river. This is one spot where a good 'lead steer' like Twisty comes in handy. If you don't get the cattle used to the idea of swimming straight across they'll begin to 'double up'. That's the cowboy's way of saying that they'll go part way across, then angle back to the same shore from which they started."

A Tough Question

"What happens if the lead cattle do manage to 'double up' in spite of everything the riders can do?" inquired the youngster.

"Now that's a question that a good many old-timers pondered for some time before one of the smart ones like John Chisholm or Charley Goodnight figured it out. Like you know, you can lead a horse to water, even though you can't make him drink. So it was a cinch to bring up the 'remuda', start the horses swimming across the pesky stream, and sure enough them cattle had no hankering to be left behind, so they up and plunged in to see could they beat the horses to the other side."

The "Arbuckle" chuckled at this explanation, but he could readily see how it would be much easier to handle the horses in the water than the cattle.

As they watched, the cattle moved across the river without any untoward happening. When they topped a rise on the far side and the wagons were safely across, the "cookie" and the "wrangler" waved farewell to the "old-timer" and the "greenhorn." The two men sat their horses and watched the rising dust that marked the passage of the trail-herd.

The Trail Cutter

Then as they turned to ride leisurely back to the ranch, the mavericker said:

"There are a lot of other interesting terms and incidents that crop up on a trail drive. For one thing there's the 'rep' or 'trail cutter'. He has a downright interesting job."

"What's a 'rep'?" inquired the lad.

"That's another case where your waddy is saving syllables," remarked the oldster. "At a roundup or a trail drive, every large ranch or cattle association had a 'representative' briefly referred to as a 'rep'. At the roundup it was his job to see that the cattle belonging to his boss were properly branded and set aside for the benefit of the owner. On a trail drive it was the job of the 'rep' or the 'trail cutter' to stop a moving herd and look over the cattle to make sure that they were all properly branded, and didn't belong to members of the group for which he was 'repping.'"

"That sounds as though it would be quite a job," declared the "Arbuckle." "I should think some of the big trail drives would ride right over these 'trail cutters' and not listen to them."

"Sometimes they did, for a fact," the old "mossy-horn" agreed. "But it didn't always pay to do that. For one thing, a rancher had to make one or two drives each year to keep in funds, and if a trail-herd refused to be cut going north, there was no telling what might happen when the rannies were coming back south with a sackful of 'dinero' to pay for their trouble."

Trimming the Herd

The pilgrim could see the justice of this, and listened while his mentor explained the mechanics of "cutting out" cattle that had been picked up on the trail. This activity on the part of the "trail cutter" and his men was known as "trimming the herd" or "cutting the herd." The groups of cattle were run off the trail into bunches called "cutter herds." These were held by the stock association "reps" or "trail cutters" until they were claimed by their owners or could be driven to their home range.

On most of the important trails, "cutter herds" were maintained about a hundred miles apart. Cowboys who looked after these

herds were paid a pro-rata share of their wages by all of the ranchers represented in the herd.

"Are the trail cutters the only ones who move in on these drives?" the youngster wanted to know.

"Nowadays that's about all a trail driver has to worry about," explained the old-timer, "because the drives are shorter, and don't have to look for as much trouble as they did in the old days."

He then went on to tell about the "shotgun quarantines," and other handicaps put up by cattlemen or settlers anxious to prevent cattle from Texas from going up into Kansas and spreading the dreaded "Texas fever" or "tick fever" as we more familiarly know it. Some of the folks could be convinced that the cattle fever wasn't peculiar to the folks from Texas, but then they merely changed the name to "Spanish fever" or "Southern fever."

Fox-Fire

The tenderfoot made a note of these terms, then tried to recall some of the other words he had heard exchanged between the range riders on the trail and at the ranch. Finally he said: "What's 'fox-fire'?"

"'Fox-fire'?" repeated the mavericker. "Why that's the cowboy's equivalent of St. Elmo's fire or the Fata Morgana. It's the phosphorescent light that comes up on a cow's horns and bobs about his ears during an electrical storm. It's enough to scare the

cattle plumb to death, not to mention what it did to some of the poor ignorant cowboys of the old days. Now that we know what it's all about, we can laugh about it."

"Lightning" explained the old-timer, "was another thing that plumb scared a riding cowboy on a trail drive. He figured that it was not only going to accompany the thunder that would scare his dogies into a stampede, but he was sure that lightning was going to strike him dead. Many a cowboy left his spurs and six-gun behind him because he was afraid they'd attract the lightning. Like as not the same ranny would go right along with a cartridge belt full of brass-cased cartridges, and you know that brass and copper are even better conductors of electricity than iron is."

More for the Lexicon

The youngster chuckled at this. Then he looked at his notebook and asked:

"What do these words mean? A 'lay-up', a 'lay-over', a 'dry drive', and 'Injun ransom.'"

The old-timer puffed pleasantly on his pipe and gigged his horse with blunted spurs before he replied:

"Those are good words for your lexicon, son. And they're plumb easy to answer. A 'lay-up' was the stopping of a drive completely for some important reason. There might have been a bankful river, or a drought or anything else that threatened to destroy the herd if it continued. A 'lay-over' was a short stop during a drive. Sometimes it was done to permit the cattle to feed on good grass. Other times it was done to dip animals against tick fever, or there might have been many similar reasons. A 'dry drive' was one where the cattle had to travel from one end to the other without water. Naturally it was hard on the stock, and wasn't done very often unless absolutely necessary. Probably the most famous dry drive in cattle history was Charley Goodnight's drive out into New Mexico."

"And the 'Injun ransom'?" the lad reminded him.

"Well," explained the mavericker, "often during the drives across the old Indian Territory, a chief and a couple of braves would hold up a trail drive. The wise trail boss would turn over several head of cattle for the Indians. They never took more than they could use, because Indians weren't wasters. That was your 'Injun ransom.'"

By this time they were back in sight of the ranch-house. The pilgrim was "saddle-weary" but convinced that the journey had been well worth while.

The mavericker promised to fill out any other items regarding trail-herding in an evening chat, before steering the pilgrim into another field of Western language. I hope you'll join them when they take up this subject next issue!

Read Our Companion Magazine THRILLING WESTERN—15c at All Stands!

"Look, boss, I brought yuh some mushrooms," said Stew, while a cold chill ran along his spine

CRISIS ON THE CURLY Q

By DON ALVISO

Stew Tyler's bout with red-eye brings on no pink elephants, but he shore has a run-in with some man-eating mushrooms!

DARK AND dreary thoughts filled the so-called mind of "Stew" Tyler, cook from the Curly Q, as he rode slowly homeward on the bare back of heavy, plodding Tom. He was leading Jerry, the other half of the wagon team.

There is no remorse so bitter he was thinking, that the misery of a screaming hangover can not make it more galling; and no conscience so bruised that throbbing temples, blurring eyes and a fever-parched tongue will not rub salt into the wounds.

Though Stew Tyler would have used more simple and more profane words, he was reflecting seriously on the qualities of remorse as he tried to explain the situation to the wide-rumped, heavy-hocked draught horse.

"It wasn't the whisky that done it, Tom," Stew said aloud, and the plodding horse cocked one ear back. "It was them five beers I drunk right after finishin' off the second bottle of Kentucky Dew. Then I started home and got so doggone sleepy I couldn't set up on the wagon seat no

more, and when I stops and lays down on the load for a little nap, somehow or other my quirly drops down between the stuff and sets fire to the hay in the bottom of the wagon.

"Then this Hoss-shoe rider comes along just in time to unhook you and Jerry and drag me off'n the wagon. And now the wagon is burned up, and so's all the grub, and worst of all the coffee and flapjack flour and syrup is gone, too. And like as not, goin' without both his flapjacks and coffee on Sunday mornin', the boss' undigestion is on him ag'in, and no tellin' what he might do."

It was Monday afternoon. The previous Saturday morning, Jed Bonnette, owner of the Curly Q, had sent his cook with the team and wagon to Calico to buy and bring back a load of supplies. The fall roundup had lasted longer than expected and supplies on the ranch had run low. In fact the Curly Q had been out of flapjack flour for a week and the last of the coffee had been used Saturday morning.

Jed Bonnette was a man of simple tastes who ate in the grub shack with his men. But Jed had to have four cups of hot black coffee every morning, and on Sunday mornings he had to have flapjacks and syrup with his coffee. Jed claimed that any deviation from this Sunday morning diet brought on terrible attacks of indigestion. Other things could bring on Jed's indigestion, too, such as his crew tearing up a saloon on a Saturday night spree, a tough bronc throwing him, or the time when his prized Angus bull got mired down in the swamp.

And every time Jed got an attack of indigestion his temper became very sour and it was all Hank Bodie, the foreman, and the rest of the crew could do to keep him from strapping on his other gun and riding over to shoot it out with the McWades on Mud Creek.

CAL McWADE and his son, Sam, ran a two-bit spread in the foot hills over west of the Curly Q. Jed had known for years that the McWades filched an occasional dogie from the Curly Q beef that grazed in the canyons south of McWade's range. But when Jed's stomach wasn't upset he didn't fret too much about the McWade's petty rustling.

"A dogie now and then ain't goin' to break us," Jed would say and let it go at that.

But when some real crisis hit him, such as lack of coffee or flapjacks, Jed's stomach would turn over and he would immediately become convinced that the McWades had got their ropes on everything on the Curly Q under two years of age. He would be ready, alone and single-handed, to ride over and blast it out with Cal and Sam. The bad part of it was, that Cal McWade was a bad hombre with a record down along the Rio, and his shifty-eyed son showed promise of being another of the same. The good part of it was that so far, in one way or another, the Curly Q crew had been able to keep Jed at home during each crisis until his indigestion had passed.

Remembering all this only added to Stew Tyler's remorse and bruised his conscience more. In his mind there was the gory picture of the boss lying dead with both McWades pumping more lead into his lifeless body. But the sound of a galloping horse coming toward him, brought Stew out of his miserable reverie. A moment later Hank Bodie pulled up and glared at Stew.

"Well, stupid," he shouted, " what doggone bonehead trick have yuh pulled now? Moseyin' back, two days late, ridin' Tom and leadin' Jerry. With no wagon and no grub. I'd ought to shoot yuh right here if yuh was worth a bullet. So talk fast before I get wasteful and do it anyhow."

Stew Tyler passed a red-hot tongue over cracked and burning lips, lifted bloodshot eyes to meet Hank's enraged gaze, then hung his head.

"Well, Hank, it was like this," he commenced lamely. "Soon as I got into town Saturday I went right to McFee's store like the boss said. I looked over his stock and bought the grub. And McFee, bein' in a generous mood which is rare for a Scot, gives me a bottle of Kentucky Dew. Well, it bein' awful dry out and a hot afternoon besides, I starts samplin' the gift while McFee's man loads the wagon. It was one of them deceivin' bottles with a big dent in the bottom and first thing I knew it was empty.

"You know how it is, Hank. That sample tasted so good I goes down to the Trail Saloon and orders up another just like it. Well, as the sayin' goes, time staggered by, and 'fore I realized it that bottle was gone and it was gettin' to be evenin' and I starts out of the Trail. But right at the door who should I meet but Slip Harney from the Six Point Star, and Slip says, 'Let's have a beer.' So I had a

few beers with Slip and that was what done it.

"I starts for home and gets so sleepy I couldn't stick on the wagon seat, it was buckin' so. I was so sleepy I didn't know I had lit a quirly and still had it in my mouth, and when I stops and lays down on the load for a little bit of a nap—well, the wagon ketches fire and a Hoss-shoe rider comes along and unhooks the team and takes them and me back to town. I was so sleepy I didn't get my sleep out till way late Sunday afternoon and by then it was rainin' pitchforks and papooses, so I stays over in Calico last night, bein' bad in need of a handful of hair from the hound which bit me. Is the boss purty mad, Hank?"

Hank was still glaring.

"Mad? He's as wild as a washwoman with her hair caught in the clothes ringer. He stomped around most of the day yesterday waitin' for yuh to show up with his coffee and flapjacks. He was so mad he tromped on his cat's tail plumb on purpose, and then he begins cussin' about his indigestion and threatenin' to ride over and wipe out the McWades.

"When yuh hadn't showed up by midnight last night, I sneaked into his room and got his guns and hid 'em and Limpy hid his saddle and bridle. Then me and the boys drove the remuda from the corral way up into the canyon and I told the boys to stay clear of the house and watch. You know how Jed is when he gets one of these spells; he's set on goin' to McWade's alone and if he does they'll kill him shore.

"But like as not he's found his irons by now and has mebbe caught up a steer and is ridin' him bareback, headed for McWade's. And it's all yore fault, you—you—" Hank Bodie, being a careful man, could not find the proper word to finish.

Stew Tyler licked his parched lips again. "I'm sorry, Hank. I—I—"

"Oh, shut up!" Hank snapped, and spurred past Stew and the team, swinging left toward the foothills and McWades.

The cook, now feeling worse than ever, plodded miserably on toward the ranch.

After Sunday night's rain, the air was heavy with moisture and the sun was shining brightly. It was a lovely fall afternoon but it meant nothing to Stew Tyler except that the strong light hurt his throbbing eyes. Then, a mile from the ranchhouse where the trail dipped down across the tree-lined creek, something small and round and white under the trees on the creek bank caught Stew's attention. He pulled Tom to a halt and sat still a moment, blinking. Then as an idea slowly and painfully took shape in his mind, some of the dejected misery left his face and a shrewd light came into his eyes.

"Mushrooms!" he murmured. "Nice and purty and tender, comin' out after the rain. And if there's anything the boss likes better than flapjacks, it's a nice big steak smothered in mushrooms."

WITH a suddenly acquired agility, Stew scrambled down off Tom's broad back and ran to the spot on the creek bank, tearing off his hat as he ran.

"Look at 'em! Must me two dozen or more, and tender as a kitten's nose! Ain't been up more'n two three hours."

With a tenderness suited to the occasion, Stew picked the mushrooms, placing them one by one in the crown of his hat. When the hat was full he knotted together the corners of his bandanna to hold the rest.

Then he was back on Tom, holding the bandanna in his left hand and balancing the upturned hat in the curve of his arm. He kicked Tom's ribs with his spurless heels and slapped him with the reins.

"Giddap, yuh lazy old hay chopper! Mebbe we only got minutes to save the boss' life."

When Stew reached the ranch yard he didn't stop at the cook shack but rode straight on to the corral. Jed Bonnette was there, busily lenghtening the stirrup straps and letting out the cinches of an old saddle to fit a fat old mare which evidently had been the only mount he could catch afoot. Jed had found his guns, and wore them now. He just threw the cook one scorching glance and returned his attention to the saddle.

Stew tried to think of just the right thing to say, but couldn't think at all.

"Boss, I—" he began.

"Yuh're fired!" Jed snapped. "Get off that hoss and roll yore rags, and get out of my sight!"

Stew felt a cold chill run along his spine. He got off Tom, carefully, so he wouldn't crush or spill the precious mushrooms. But instead of heading for the bunkhouse, he edged closer to the corral poles and tried again.

"Boss, I—I'm sorry about the wagon, and the grub, and especially about the coffee and flapjack flour. But look, I brought yuh some mushrooms. Nice ten-

der ones, too. Just come up after the rain."

Jed pulled so viciously on the cinch lace that the fat old mare groaned.

"Yuh're fired!" Jed shouted again, obviously too angry to grasp the meaning of the harnesses team with no wagon behind. "Get away from me quick before I gun yuh or somethin'. You—" He turned to look at Stew with one eye half-closed. "Eh? Mushrooms, did yuh say?"

The cook's face brightened with hope. He almost fell between the corral poles and held out his hat with its precious cargo for Jed's inspection.

"Look! The kind yuh like best, too. And I'll fry 'em with two of the biggest, tenderest steaks off the steer up in the ice cellar."

Jed gave the mushrooms a hungrily appraising inspection, then turned to look over the mare's back toward the foot hills and McWade's.

"Man can't fight on an empty stomach," he murmured, then snapped: "Well, fry 'em up! What the devil yuh standin' waitin' for? If I get some decent vittles in my stomach I may feel better. If I don't, I'm ridin' over on Mud Crick."

Stew ran toward the kitchen, yelling for "Limpy" Burke, his helper.

"Build up the fire, Limpy. Quick! Then get me two nice big front quarter steaks off that steer the boys butchered Friday. Hurry now!"

Limpy built up the fire and while Stew carefully cleaned and washed the mushrooms, Limpy hobbled up to the ice cellar after the steaks. Later, with the steaks sizzling in two hot frying pans, and while Stew sliced in crisp sections of mushrooms on top, Limpy looked on with glum disapproval. It was obvious that he was in little better humor than the boss. Stew knew that the reason for this was that Limpy had been forced to cook for the crew during his own two-day spree in Calico.

"How yuh know them's mushrooms and not poison toadstools?" Limpy asked sourly. "How yuh know, anyhow?"

"I know because I read a book on 'em," Stew snapped positively. "And besides ain't I cooked steak and mushrooms for the boss before? Yuh think I'd feed 'em to the boss if I wasn't shore, and mebbe poison him?"

"Well, could be." Limpy shrugged. "Yuh don't look none too steady, and yore eyes is purty blurry, an' it's been a long time ago yuh read this book. Besides I just heard Jed fire yuh—an' yuh could mebbe be mistook this time, on purpose or otherwise."

Stew made a swing at him with the hot-cake turner he was using to stir the mushrooms.

"Get out of here! Yuh're just sore, that's all, 'cause yuh had to do a little work for a change while I was gone. Now git!"

Limpy sullenly left the kitchen, but the gloom he had spread remained behind him. Like many careful mushroom hunters, Stew Tyler had thoroughly learned to identify three or four edible species and he stuck to these, never taking a chance on any other variety which he did not know. He had been very sure about these particular fungi when he had picked them down by the creek. But Limpy's skepticism had done something to his sureness. Stew began to worry. His eyes had been throbbing pretty badly on the ride home and they had played tricks on him, making him see things in the trail that weren't there. Now he wished he had examined the mushrooms again more closely after he had washed them and before he had cut them up. Now they were half fried, and it was too late. The identifying marks were gone.

"They're good—I know they are," he told himself. "It's just that darned Limpy's spiteful talk."

BUT STEW was still worried. He stirred the frying mushrooms so vigorously that several pieces spilled from the skillet and dropped to the floor. He let them lay until he had salted and peppered the two big steaks and turned them over in the pans.

Then Jed Bonnette's big pet tomcat, Bluey, came rubbing up against his legs and Stew remembered the pieces of mushroom on the floor. He picked them up and found they had cooled, so he carried them to the back porch where Bluey's dish always stood. The cat followed him hungrily. Stew dropped the pieces of mushroom into Bluey's dish and hurried back to tend the steaks.

As soon as he had the boss fed, he would have to rummage around and find something for the crew, and hurry to get supper ready. Not a man save Limpy and the boss had been in sight when Stew had reached home, but the other riders would be drifting in soon and wanting their supper. Stew put a big platter into

the oven to warm, then set out a fork and a sharp knife, and bread and catsup on the chow table just as Jed Bonnette stamped in.

"What's keepin' yuh?" Jed growled. "Where's them mushrooms and steaks?"

"Comin' right up, boss," Stew assured him. "Soon as I dish 'em up."

As Stew slid the steaks onto the hot platter and edged them around with crisp brown mushroom slices, the aroma which drifted up to his nostrils made his mouth water. When he carried the platter in and set it before Jed, the boss could remain glum for only a moment. As the irresistible food smell came to him, his face broke into its habitual broad smile.

Stew stayed near just long enough to see Jed reach for knife and fork and catsup bottle all at the same time, and then, knowing when silence is most golden, he hurried out to the almost bare storeroom to see what he could find for the crew's supper.

After some rummaging around he found a part of a sack of potatoes, and that was all. Well, he would send Limpy up after more steaks. With bread and fried potatoes, that would have to do. He forgot Limpy's gloomy talk and the worry it had caused him.

But as he started up onto the porch on the way back to the kitchen, Stew stopped abruptly. There, not ten feet from his empty dish lay Bluey, stretched out motionless and still. Stew looked at the empty dish again, then back at Bluey. He dropped the potato sack as if his hands were suddenly frozen.

He could hear the sound of knife and fork against the platter as Jed, sitting at one end of the long table inside, ate his steak and mushrooms with gusto. Suddenly a bewildered and hunted look came into Stew Tyler's eyes. Walking as quietly as he could he hurried into the kitchen, tearing off his apron on the way.

Grabbing paper and pencil from the shelf behind the stove he scrawled a hasty note and stuck it to the fly paper on the door as he went out. The note read:

Limpy Burke is a liar and I didn't poison the boss on purpose. If Jed lives long enough please tell him I am sorry about Bluey. I had nothin agin the cat or the boss either and this was jist a accident the same as the wagon and the grub burnin up. So long, Stew Tyler.

Stew grabbed his hat from the peg by the door. After a cautious glance over the yard, to be sure no one was around, he raced to the corral where the fat mare still stood, saddled and bridled. Stew mounted and rode out of the corral, but he didn't go through the yard past the cook shack.

He circled the corral and back of the barn, heading for the nearest willows on the creek.

He put the willow-bordered creek between him and the Curly Q ranchhouse and headed up the canyon which ran south of McWade's place. When Hank Bodie and the crew, with maybe the sheriff along, started out after him they wouldn't figure him going this way. It was known on the Curly Q that once in town, Cal McWade had given Stew a pretty bad scare and Hank would guess that the cook would be afraid to ride so close to McWade's, even when he was running away.

As he pushed the lazy mare up the canyon, all of Stew's misery was back upon him, and more. First the wagon and the grub had burned up, now Bluey was dead and the boss would die too, if he wasn't dead already. Again Stew was hearing Limpy Burke saying in that positive tone: "Yuh could be mistook—on purpose or otherwise."

Stew suddenly found himself hating Limpy Burke. The boys would be coming in for supper now and they would find Bluey, and they would find the boss, dead, maybe sitting right at the table with some of the mushrooms left on the platter to tell the tale. And if any more telling was needed, Limpy would take care of that. It would be a plain case of a man being fired for carelessness and drunkenness, and then for revenge poisoning the man who had fired him.

Stew kicked harder at the fat side of the mare. No, he doubted that Hank Bodie would wait to pick up the sheriff. In spite of his infrequent surges of temper when the indigestion was upon him, Jed Bonnette was the best boss a man ever saw. He was very much liked, yes, even loved and respected by every man on the Curly Q, and Hank Bodie and the crew would make short work of the skunk who had poisoned their boss.

Stew shivered and tried to prod the mare into more speed. He knew how an outlaw felt now. This was what it was like to be a killer, hunted, friendless, and always on the run.

DARKNESS came and Stew still pushed on up the canyon, with no thought of Cal McWade and his renegade son. Farther on the canyon split three ways and if he could make it to the fork before they caught up with him, maybe he could throw them off. Time after time Stew heard sounds behind him which he was sure was his pursuers, but when he stopped to listen he could hear nothing.

When he reached the forks he couldn't decide which trail to take, and suddenly realized how tired and weary he was. This had been a very hard day, a bad day, and now it was getting late, probably past midnight. It was too dark to see the hands of his watch and Stew was afraid to light a match. He decided on the left hand fork, turned that way and pushed on.

He rode on for an hour, then caught himself dropping off to sleep in the saddle. He decided that perhaps he had thrown his pursuers off at the fork and now dared to stop for a little nap.

He found a place for the mare under some low overhanging limbs and a place for himself beside a giant fallen pine. The night was cold but weariness lay so heavily upon Stew that he fell asleep soon after making himself comfortable in his bed of leaves.

How long he had slept he did not know when he was awakened by a rough hand shaking him. He sat up sleepily, but came fully awake with a start when he recognized Hank Bodie's voice:

"Wake up, Stew! It's Hank. Me and the boys have come to take yuh in."

Well, Stew thought, it had to come some time. Might as well be now. It would save him lonely years riding the owlhoot on the back trails. Now that his end had come he would be brave about it. Even if he was only the cook, he would show them he could die like a man.

"All right, Hank," he said, getting to his feet. "I won't give yuh no trouble. I got just one favor to ask yuh, though. If it's all the same to you, make this a shootin' party, 'stead of a hangin'. I got a tender throat and I never could stand anything tight around my neck."

From somewhere behind the foreman came the sound of harsh laughter. Hank reached out and caught Stew's shoulder in a steely grip.

"Say—what kind of talk yuh givin' us? Yuh still drunk? What's this shootin' and hangin' stuff?"

"Well," Stew muttered miserably, "Bluey's dead. I saw him. And if three little bitty pieces of them poison mushrooms would kill Bluey, the boss is probably dead by now, and I don't blame you boys for wantin' to string me up. I feel like shootin' myself. I would if I had a gun."

More laughter came from the farther darkness, and now Hank let out a loud whoop.

"Gosh!" he said, when he could stop laughing long enough to talk. "Limpy shore had yuh scared, didn't he? He tried to give me the same story, but them mushrooms wasn't poison, Stew. In fact old Jed said it's the best meal he ever ate, and he felt so good after he had it inside of him, he forgot about the McWades and didn't even get mad when I told him about the wagon and grub burnin' up. I sent one of the boys over to the Hoss-shoe to borrer some coffee and flapjack flour for breakfast, and Jed is sendin' Limpy into town after another load of grub tomorrer. Soon as I heard Limpy's talk and saw yore note, I figgered how yore mind was workin'. So me and a couple of the boys came after yuh."

"B-but, the cat?" Stew blurted. "Bluey. I saw him, layin' still and dead, there in the yard."

"Dead nothin," Hank chuckled. "When the boss tromped on Bluey's tail Sunday, Bluey took off like a calf from a hot brandin' iron. He stayed out all night and all day and come back tired out. After he et them mushrooms, Limpy came along from the cow barn and give him a drink of warm milk, so then Bluey just stretched out for a nap, like cats will. Bluey and Jed is both in bed asleep right now, and both purrin', too, I'll bet. Come along, Stew, yuh got to get up early to fry flapjacks in the mornin'."

COMING NEXT ISSUE

TANGLE FOOT

First of a New Series of Stories by CHUCK MARTIN

Neither Cooney nor Paddy saw the two heads cautiously watching the fight from the window

MEN OF THEIR WORD

By WILLIAM O'SULLIVAN

The agreement between Paddy Carney and Cooney Banks takes care of all fightin', cheatin' an' spreein' at poker tables!

COONEY BANKS HAD been up for two hours when "Paddy" Carney, his partner, rolled out of the bunk and stumbled on bowed legs to the glowing stove, his blankets clutched to his squat, powerful frame.

"Whut yuh been doin', darn yuh?" Paddy Carney growled, turning his back so that the wood fire would have a generous target for its warmth. "These here floors is colder'n a banker's heart at midnight in a blizzard. Don't 'The Agreement' operate both ways?"

Cooney sighed and turned the frying bacon with a fork. He saw that the coffee water was boiling, so he dumped in an unmeasured quantity of grounds and started stirring.

"The Agreement holds," he murmured. "I'm a man of my word."

"And so am I," Paddy snapped, his small blue eyes focused on his partner of three months. "When I wuz on the short end, I had everythin' nice an' warm. Now, didn't I?"

"September in the High Sierras ain't November in the High Sierras," Cooney said mildly, his black spade beard undulating like a gentle ocean swell as he chewed his tobacco. "Also, whilst you was workin' the claim, I wuz dropping trees an' cuttin' heart timbers to shore the diggin's up proper. Also, I laid in the firewood. I started openin' the new pocket, an' I terraced a path down to the crick so's to make it easier to tote water come this bad weather. Man, nobody around Silverton has it nice as us."

Paddy glared and walked to the single window that the shack boasted. Paddy always managed to introduce the subject of the window, a small four-paneled affair, whenever Cooney started to detail his share of the partnership work. It was upon this window that the partnership had been founded.

MONTHS before Paddy Carney arrived in Silverton, Cooney Banks had staked out a claim across the valley from fabulous Virginia City. Cooney was working it when along came Paddy with his sturdy legs, his sparkling Irish wit, and his will to work. And also that window frame.

The gang in the Last Chance Saloon had roared their mirth at the sight of Paddy—blocky, red-haired, mustached. He was dressed in faded levis, fish-oiled boots, and a hooded windbreaker, with a red bandanna for a head piece.

He carried the framed glass in one hand and his bedding roll in the other. He let it be known that he was looking for a partner to work a claim.

Cooney Banks, friendly amusement touching his dark eyes, had bought the vagrant Paddy a drink, then sized him up, asking about the window.

"All I gotta do," the weary traveler confided, "is build me a shack around this here window, and I'm set. Of course, I gotta get me a claim, too. It's also nice to have a burro an' maybe some vittles laid in for the bad season. Then, too, it's fittin' to have some animals to haul the ore to the mill. But I'm just about fixed with this here window as a starter."

Cooney had what the window should go into. That was a shack. Cooney also had a claim, a burro, some vittles laid in, and a way to get his ore to the mill. He had thoughtfully hacked out a road, with his ax biting through the firs. He had laboriously rolled rock down the slope to the rude trail and fashioned it so that a teamster could get through to the ore by riding his wheels on the stepping-stones of rock.

Cooney had had a need for a partner and a hunkering for company. He saw how it was with the not-so-young Paddy Carney, and he figured he could brighten up his shack with that window. So they struck The Agreement. It was put down on paper and entered into solemnly, with little talk. There were long spaces of silence that stretched the words out.

The Agreement was Cooney's idea, but to give Paddy the right of it, he hadn't cottoned to it at first.

"Now, pardner," the burly little Paddy had protested, his blue eyes troubled, "I never wuz a double-yoke man meself. I allus travel light, fast, an' unhindered. Mebbe we'd best take it easy an' work this thing out."

"No," Cooney had overruled him, "this here workin' idee—The Agreement, I calls it—should make us satisfied, no matter what. There'll allus be a boss. There'll allus be work done, an' there'll allus be turn about, makin' fer fair play. Another good thing, pardners can tie theirselves up, each arguin' with the other. This way, no arguments. But mind, it's strictly between you 'n me. It don't let everybody into yore affairs."

For a time Paddy Carney was a blessing to the lonely Cooney Banks. In a poker game the burly Paddy won a guitar and a tambourine from an itinerant medicine-show man. Cooney had been astonished and delighted when Paddy played the stringed instrument with skillful, if blunt and calloused, fingers. Paddy raised his voice in a tenor that would have been lyrical if the inroads of rot-gut whisky hadn't blurred it some.

Paddy's wit and his amusing conversations with "The King," as he christened their patient and plodding burro, had Cooney in roars of laughter. But black moods would descend on the dwarfed giant of an Irishman, moods that were spaced at first, and then closer and closer together.

Cooney thought he knew what it was.

"The man has led a peculiar life," he

saw it, "partnerless an' with terrific sprees now an' then to space out his spells o' loneliness. It's growin' on him. He wants to bust loose. But it is in The Agreement that no one o' us should spend whilst we are still searchin' fer the true vein. He's a man of his word. But it's chawin' him up inside somethin' terrible."

IN ACCORDANCE with The Agreement, Cooney had done the labor for a spell while Paddy got accustomed to the high altitude of the area and of the claim. Cooney swung the pick into an angle of the diggings that had made him thoughtful more than once. Paddy, watching him with his bright blue eyes perplexed, made a suggestion.

"Sure an' ye swing the pick like a true gandy dancer, but ain't ye wastin' time, too? Now, that streak o' silver over here, it's my idea we should be workin' that. I grant ye, we can use more room, especially with yer height."

There was no argument about it. Cooney smilingly shifted his operations to the small but steadily paying vein of silver that had first atracted him to the claim.

When enough ore had eventually been worked out by the burro and piled high for the ore wagons, Cooney dropped the pick and the shovel and took The King's bridle. Paddy moved in, his huge arms working for endless hours as he addressed himelf to the vein of silver.

Cooney soon suggested, "Now, like I was doin' the first day, Paddy, work the corner there in the back awhile."

"An' what in the name of the saints for?" Paddy had bristled. "Is it workin' for fun that ye think I am? Man, I'm workin' the pay dirt, not excavatin' fer no whim."

Cooney could have pressed it, but he didn't. Instead, he took a generous chaw of his plug and sat with his thoughts. Then he shouldered the saw, hefted the ax and the dogwood wedges, and went into the woods for more timber.

He terraced the drop to the creek, although it was not in The Agreement for him to do so. He worked the road to the claim so that the ore wagons would find it easier to negotiate and would come more willingly and for less money. That wasn't in The Agreement for him to do, either.

He stacked wood in the lean-to erected on the side of the shack, and he stacked dried and cut wood inside, where it would be handy for Paddy to get at. That wasn't in The Agreement. But his work seemed only to increase Paddy's truculence and to bring on dark moods more and more often, until at last it was rare that a pleasant word passed between the two.

Then came Cooney's turn to go back into the diggings. It was then that Paddy would lie awake long in the night, his grunting and muttering audible to Cooney. Paddy would arise late in the morning and start finding fault the instant his bare, flat feet touched the cold floor.

It served only to infuriate him the more when he found that Cooney had been up hours, had been to the diggings, had returned to bring up the pot-bellied stove's warmth, and had the breakfast of bacon, fried hominy, beans, and coffee ready.

"Ye've been goin' to Silverton a lot of late," Cooney now said as he stirred the coffee. "Mayhap it would be better if ye stayed overnight?"

Paddy glowered, stamping his feet to warm them. "Are you inferrin', pardner, that I'm likely to tie one on? Git drunk. Is it that, maybe?"

Cooney shot a glance at him. "Well now, I didn't make mention of it."

"I'm keepin' my part of The Agreement," Paddy growled. He went still, his eyes squinting out the window at the trail. "Huh!"

Cooney ladled out a taste of coffee and grimaced. "See somethin'?"

"An' if I do or I don't, it is me own window through which I do or don't, ain't it?" the little Irishman blared. He turned to face Cooney. "Ye're spoilin' fer a fight, ain't ye?"

For answer, Cooney sighed and unlaced his boots under Paddy's watchful gaze. Then he carefully kicked the two homemade chairs out of the way, rolled up the sleeves of his wool shirt, and spat on his hands invitingly.

PADDY came forward in a crouch, breathing in a whistle through his teeth, his small eyes glinting with battle. He was circling warily when Cooney dropped his loosely held guard and raised a hand palm-outward.

"Hold!" the lanky, bearded Cooney Banks cried. "Afore we start this, pard-

ner, mebbe ye'd like to check the ore? I piled up a good bit of it whilst ye've been lyin' around belly-achin'."

Paddy made some suggestions, all impractical if not impossible, about what disposition Cooney could make of his blankety-blank ore, and he came in swinging.

Neither man saw the two heads that poked cautiously up for a view of the inmates of the shack.

Cooney was too busy trying to save a leg from the prostrate Irishman's mauling toe-hold. Paddy was occupied equally well with figuring some way to get Cooney's foot out of his mouth, since biting didn't seem to work the trick.

They fought like gentlemen, with their shoes off. But it was doubtful if the toughest sole could have been more bruising than Paddy's vigorous kicks or Cooney's skillful butts to the midriff.

They fought to the four corners of the room. They fought past the stove and back into it. A scream of rage came from Paddy when he contacted the glowing iron sides with his not-so-iron stern. In getting away from the blistering stove Paddy managed to spill the lethal black and hot coffee onto Cooney's bare feet.

The blasting blows each had struck tempered the cabin-fever hatred of the two. Thus there was little rancor left in the men when the common pain of burns seared through their homicidal intent and turned their minds to more pressing needs.

Cooney shoved Paddy back and grabbed for the slab of bacon hanging by a cord. Cooney cut strips to rub the fatty stuff onto his feet.

"Who is boss?" Paddy yelled. "Gimme that bacon! Ow, ow, me sainted mother come to me aid! This devil has fair burnt the skin off me posterity! Gimme the bacon, drat ye, Banks!"

And The Agreement was such that Cooney Banks straightened and passed Paddy Carney the bacon.

"Now, make me more coffee!" Paddy roared when the bacon fat was clapped to his stinging stern. "Begorrah, this settles it. It's action I'll take before another sun rises on that hole of a claim. It's tired I am of havin' the likes of ye forever pesterin' me. It's action I'll take."

Cooney shrugged. "Take yore blasted window, too. It's about all yuh ever brought, anyway."

And he was instantly sorry when he saw the hurt look in Paddy's blue eyes. But it had been said, and that was that.

For answer, Paddy howled, "Who is boss? Who has the say?"

"You," Cooney said, eyes worried. "Now, if yuh'll come to the ore pit—"

"No orders!" Paddy roared. "Not from ye. It's me that's callin' the tune, me bucko. Fix me coffee, an' then it's out to the diggin's with ye. And ye'll work where I marked, an' not skulk aroun' in the off corner of the shaft like I've caught ye doin'."

Cooney shrugged and was thoughtful. He walked to the window and looked out at the sky. He was turning away when something caught his eyes. He stopped.

"Ain't that Dee Souders an' Jakey Moore goin' away down the trail?"

Paddy made as if to start over, then checked it.

"Ye may see for yerself through me own window," he growled, wiping the blood from his split lips with the hem of his nightshirt. "Like as not, they're checkin' on one of the loans they've made to the boys farther along." He sipped some coffee from his tin mug. "Dee Souders is a canny poker player."

Cooney twisted his head to look at Paddy. "That's one way of callin' it," he said. "You been hangin' around with him an' Moore? Watch them two, Paddy. They're slick."

"Who is boss?" Paddy asked disdainfully.

"You. But—"

"Then let the hired help stop givin' orders," Paddy said. "To work with ye now. An' mind ye work the part I say. An' should ye find me gone when ye return, don't delay supper for me."

ALTHOUGH Cooney's eyes were worried, he didn't say anything. He ate his bacon, hominy, and beans as well as his swollen jaw would let him, then sloshed down the coffee and got his socks and boots on again.

He went slowly to the claim, as if hoping Paddy would call out to stop him. But Paddy didn't. Cooney opened the door of the shed where they stabled The King. He soon led the beast past the ore pit to the mouth of the diggings.

He stared into the fuzzy-gray of the sky where Mount Rose and Mount Peavine thrust their snow-capped shoulders into the clouds. He knew he would have

to work fast. Snow was coming.

He was working up a scoop of ore to the pit when Paddy came out. Bundled to the ears against the cold, Paddy hurried along the trail to the well-beaten ore road that led to other diggings in the area.

He was a small spot on the snow-laden horizon when Cooney looked again, a spot that receded toward Silverton and the Last Chance Saloon. There Paddy would find Dee Souders and Jakey Moore and other sharpsters, who toiled not nor did they spin, yet they came out with a good profit month after month. . . .

The Last Chance was at its roaring worst. Paddy Carney was soon matching it. Paddy was the life of the party. Paddy was buying.

"How he worked Cooney out of that claim beats me," Cash Garnett said as he looked over at the inebriated Irishman and poured another set of drinks for Paddy's friends. "Paddy is no liar. If he says he is the boss, he's boss. Dee and Jakey claim to have inside information that Cooney is workin' for him just like a Chinaman. Taking orders like a waiter. Beats me, but there it is."

It beat Dee Souders and Jakey Moore, too. But they were satisfied with their good luck, if not with the cause of their windfall. Stories had come up from the stamp mill about the high grade of the Banks-Carney ore. Souders and Moore had thought long and covetously about that claim, and about how to change the name of it from Banks-Carney to Souders-Moore.

They had gone out to have a talk with the two rough and lonely miners. Sometimes a loan could be embarrassing to pay back. Sometimes the thought of copious supplies of food was enough to turn the trick. Sometimes they could drive a wedge of discontent between two partners, and do it that way.

They had arrived at the Banks-Carney claim in time to see a fight that was epic, and in time to hear things that made them happy.

Paddy Carney was the boss. From Cooney's own lips, they had heard it acknowledged when the lank, bearded man had asked his partner to come to the ore pit. The burly Irishman had told him off.

"I'm boss! It's in The Agreement!"

As the crooks had foreseen, the Irishman, his black mood riding him and his emotional upset over his fight with his partner goading him further, would soon wander to town. Then they would have their chance and would make their play.

Their cup was full to overflowing when the impressionable Irishman showed up within hours of the fight, his eyes angry, his mouth swollen, an ear torn, and a chip on his shoulder.

When he refused a drink, it was Dee Souders who said, "I thought you were boss, Paddy? Does that sour man out there tell you what to do? Aren't you boss?"

Paddy glared. "Am I boss? *Am* I? Hey, Cash, a double rye straight, with another double rye chaser. An' have some more handy, me boy. Oh ho, am I boss?"

There was ready money from Dee, an I. O. U., when Paddy wanted to buy. There was more money for a friendly game. And more money and more money.

Drinks for the house! Raise you two hundred! Double ryes, double ryes, me boy! Set 'em up again! I'll raise ye three hundred. Double ryes!

Dee and Jakey were rich men when they went to bed, after thoughtfully stowing Paddy under one of the beds and tying his leg to a bedpost.

COONEY was standing in the mine entrance when they all came up in Dee's wagon. Jakey was smoking a long cigar. Dee was driving with the air of a proprietor. Paddy, flushed and defiant, was also a bit distressed.

"Good news, Cooney," Jakey said along the barrel of his cigar, his mouth trying to grin and his eyes freezing it before it was quite born. "Paddy drove a shrewd bargain when he sold out to us. Now yuh can go back to Silverton an' live like a gent."

"We're takin' over," Dee confirmed it, getting down and looping the reins around a wheel spoke. He made a neat tie of it. "I think we'll move a gang right in an' really get the works goin'."

Cooney stared long at Paddy, but the Irishman wasn't meeting his gaze.

"Paddy, how much do you owe them?" Cooney asked.

"None o' yer business!" Paddy Carney tried to work his old rage back up again. "I'm boss. What I say—" But he couldn't hold it. His voice broke and

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he said, "Cooney, I was drunk."

Cooney nodded, his eyes turning to Jakey and Dee. He went inside the shack. When he came out again, he had his gun belt strapped on and the holster flap was laid back against the need for anything.

Dee Souders blinked and shot a look at Moore. Both men were very careful about their hands. Paddy got down from the wagon.

"Cooney!" Paddy cried. "It's ashamed I am! I was mad, an' I did it. It's fair, but it is hard. And if it will make it any easier, I'll work fer ye fer life, with no pay but me vittles an' me bed. Sure an' the black rage was on me. I was boss. Ye shouldn't have let me go to town, Cooney. Not in the mood I was in. Not after the beatin' ye gave me."

Cooney Banks grinned, but he took care to step around Paddy so he could watch Dee and Jakey Moore.

"The beating I gave you? Man, I'm a wreck. But about this thing. You sold the claim?"

"I'd a right as boss, didn't I, Cooney? It's The Agreement."

Cooney watched Dee and Jakey relax, and he moved closer to the two of them.

"Yes, Paddy, you'd a right while you were boss. But remember, I told you to come to the ore pit."

Paddy lifted his eyes away from Cooney to look at the mound of metallic earth that was piled high and waiting for the ore wagons.

"Glory be!" he breathed. He counted rapidly on his fingers. "It was three hundred ye owed The Agreement." He was so excited he was bubbling with it. "What then, Cooney?"

"I was close to bein' boss when you walked out on me yesterday mornin'," Cooney explained. "I didn't like the way yuh were actin' an' lookin', Paddy. So I pitched in an' ran out ore all the day an' up to nine at night." His gaze touched Dee and Jakey. "I didn't figure yuh could get him drunk that quick. Yuh see, boys, Paddy made a little mistake in not estimatin' the ore. I was boss here when he got to town. Not him."

"You mean the deal we made with Paddy is no good?" asked Dee. "What is this? You can't get away with that, Cooney." He looked at Jakey Moore. "Jakey, keep your hands away from your

gun! You haven't a chance with Banks!"

Moore, his hands changing their mind and going higher, said, "Cooney, we heard you admit it to Paddy yesterday. We heard you admit he was boss."

Paddy, his eyes troubled, said, "I gave my word. I gave my signature, Cooney. It's hard but it's fair. I sold the claim. Now ye can take the balance of the money, an' I'm yer worker fer life. I'll swear it."

"Hold it, Paddy," Cooney laughed. "That's one I can hold yuh to. I had enough ore piled up, so I was boss, an' any deal yuh made with Dee or with Moore was illegal."

Dee's frown was growing. "Do you mind explaining what this is all about, Cooney? I'm going to see a lawyer. I've had plenty of dealings with miners, but I never heard such a mix-up as this thing you and your partner keep talking about."

Moore was still very careful.

"Yeah, you're boss," he said. "He's boss, you're boss. Now, just who in hades is boss?"

Cooney shrugged, his dark eyes cheerful but watchful.

"It sure is a simple thing, The Agreement. Yuh see, I didn't want ol' Paddy here to feel I was bein' charitable to him, nor did I want him to think I didn't appreciate his work. Paddy is a good worker when his moods don't get onto him. So we made The Agreement, see?"

Dee, staring, snapped, "Put it plain an' clear, Cooney. What was this agreement?"

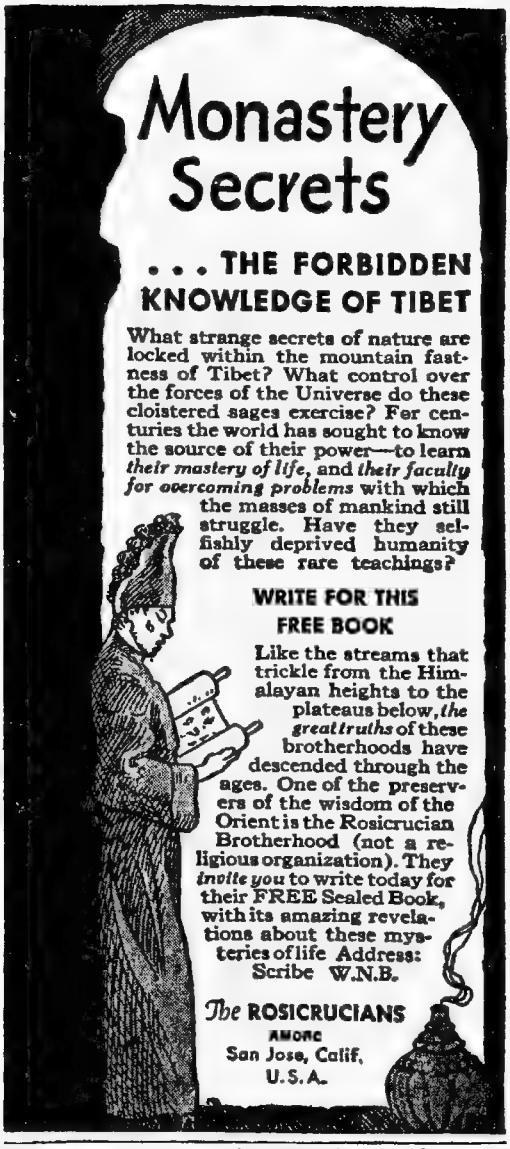
"Well, we figgered the claim might be worth two thousand and five hundred just for somethin' to talk about. So we figgered what each ton of ore was worth brought up. One man working it at a time to get it up to the pit was twenty dollars' labor, usin' The King, see?"

"The King?" Moore asked, his face blank.

"The burro. Paddy calls him The King. Anyway, it started with Paddy bein' boss an' me bringin' the ore up until I had brought up a hundred an' fifty ton. Then he owed me the cost of the claim, see? Then I was boss. Then he went into the diggin's, and he brought it up until I owed him the two thousan' and five hundred. An' then—"

Dee Souders, his eyes starting,

[*Turn page*]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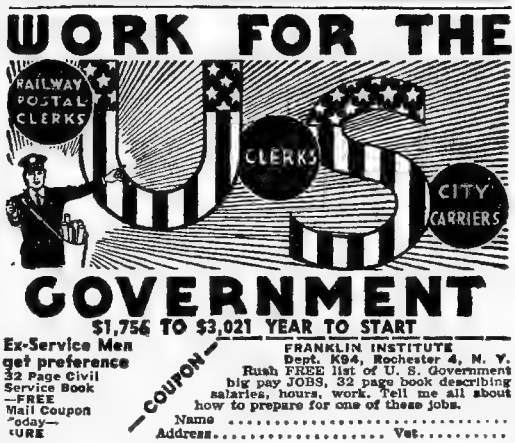
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breathed hard. "Then he owned the claim, and he was boss."

"Yeah," Cooney said, his eyes pleased with such understanding. "That's it. Simple, huh? Well, I'd just worked up enough ore so I was boss when Paddy went away thinkin' he was."

"That don't hold water!" Moore snapped.

"Then yuh mean I was always the owner?" Cooney asked innocently.

Dee Souders groaned. "He's got us, Jakey. If we claim his idea is no good, then we prove that their whole agreement was never any good." He faced Cooney. "Look, will yuh make good the money we advanced Paddy?"

"Shore thing," Cooney said equably. "But not the poker money yuh probably rooked him outa. Paddy can pay you hisself outa this ore I got from a corner I been workin'. He'll pay. I wouldn't be partners with a man who wouldn't pay."

"Mad men," Dee Souders breathed as he stumbled to the wagon reins, untied them, and motioned to Moore to climb up. "One of them owns it now, then another owns it. And—then the other owns it."

"Saves labor disputes," Cooney said bluntly. When the wagon was bouncing down the trail, he turned to Paddy. "I ought to whack yore ears off. An' me working that little bitty gold streak in the corner until I was sure I had a rich vein afore I told ye."

"It's yours!" Paddy yelled. "I wouldn't touch an ounce of it. I been a jackass, I have. A bull-headed jackass with no brains. About the biggest in the world. Instead of appreciatin' a good partner—"

"Aw, shut up an' let's carry some nuggets in," Cooney said. "I wants meat an' —well, we will see. But I aim to have me a time celebratin' a new agreement. In fact, I swore I would. And we are men of our words, ain't we?"

Paddy was grinning when he went into the shack and reached down his dusty guitar.

He ran his fingers over the strings, drew out a rich chord, and matched it with his sweet voice.

Paddy Carney found it good to be a man of his word.

•

Read EXCITING WESTERN Every Issue!

TRAIL BLAZERS

(Continued from page 9)

care, and have a way with the big, bronze gobblers.

That's all for now. Be seein' yuh again in the next excitin' issue.

—CAPTAIN RANGER

OUR NEXT ISSUE

THEY are busy again—getting in trouble up to their necks as usual. Tombstone Jones and Speedy Smith, of course! They're in BANDIT BUSTERS OF WAR DANCE, the rib-tickling novel by W. C. Tuttle which is featured in the next issue of EXCITING WESTERN.

Tombstone had lost Speedy and was looking for him in the tough border town called Agua Verde. He had searched practically everywhere.

"You look een the calabozo?" a Mexican bartender asked.

It dawned on Tombstone that the jail was the one place he hadn't looked. So he went there. The Agua Verde jail was a small adobe, box-like and with a heavy oak door. There was only one window in the front, a small, square aperture, heavily barred.

No lights were visible. The one huge padlock was unlocked. Carefully Tombstone tested the door, but found it locked from the inside. Somebody was inside the jail, keeping out of the rain.

Tombstone knocked quietly with the butt of his gun, flattening himself against the wall beside the door. No doubt the builder had been loaded with tequila, because the door opened outward.

He heard the bar being removed from inside and a man swung the door open, stepping half outside as he did so. Tombstone Jones was a man of action—not words. He hit the man on the chin with his left fist, knocking him back into the jail. Then Tombstone removed the outside padlock, threw it into the room and came in.

The jailer was sleeping peacefully, completely out from Tombstone's blow. On a rough table was an old oil lamp dimly lighting the interior. There was one cell and two prisoners, one of whom was Speedy Smith. He peered through the bars at Tombstone. The other man was big, fat and disheveled.

"What kept yuh so long?" asked Speedy.

"I made the mistake of lookin' for you in other places," replied Tombstone.

[*Turn page*]

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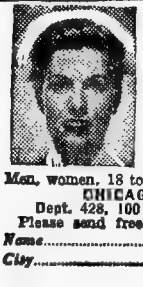

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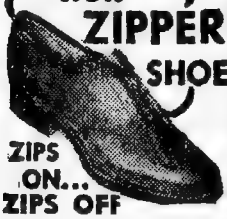

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"The key to this apartment is on the table," said Speedy.

Tombstone unlocked the cell and both men came out.

"Mister Jones, meet Mr. Atlas," Speedy said.

"Sudbury," corrected the fat man. "Philadelphia."

"Sudbury, Philadelphia, eh?" said Tombstone. "Never heard of it."

"Sudbury is my name, sir."

"You told me it was Atlas," said Speedy. "Make up yore mind."

"I am Clement P. Sudbury. My name is not Atlas, if you please. I told you I am one of the owners of the Atlas Cattle Company."

"How'd they happen to jail you, Speedy?" asked Tombstone.

"Disturbin' the peace, I reckon. I found a tarantaler in my bowl of chili and me and the cook had a argument. He can't understand English and I can't hablar much Mejicano, so it ended up with me chokin' his mouth open and makin' him swaller the bug. He shore understood that kind of stuff—and here I was."

"What happened to you, Mr. Clement?"

"Sudbury, sir. Atlas P—oh, it doesn't matter. It was a personal matter. They held me here, waiting the consummation of a—er—business deal. I've been here since last night. What a way to conduct business! I resent such methods, I tell you!"

The guard was recovering from the knockout. He had no gun. They sat him up in a chair, but he got nasty, so they locked him in the cell.

"How about pickin' up the rollin' stock and headin' north," Tombstone said. "If we stay here—maybe it'll be for keeps. You don't mind bein' saved, do yuh, Mr. Atlas?"

"The name is—oh, well it doesn't matter. Do you know my son? He is Clement P. Sudbury the Second."

"Who does he tend bar for?" asked Speedy.

"Tend bar? My son? A Sudbury, tending bar! Ridiculous! Why do you ask me that?"

"Well, we know quite a few," said Speedy soberly.

"I may as well tell you," Sudbury said wearily. "My son is heir to my whole estate. Millions—the young fool! And he fell in love with Lilita. Pretty, but hardly the type I would pick for his wife. Infatuated, the young fool. I came down here to buy her

off. She doesn't love him—she loves his money.

"They wanted five thousand dollars. She promised to go down to Mexico City and forget. We negotiated for hours. I had no such money with me. I gave them a check for five thousand on the bank at Arrowhead. They were to have Slim De Long, foreman of the Atlas Cattle Company, cash the check for them. I wrote instruction to Slim. They—well, I had to stay here until the deal was consummated."

"One born every thirty seconds," said Speedy. "Yore best bet is to forget the whole deal and get out with us."

"But it was a legitimate deal, sir. I felt that it was cheap."

Tombstone shook his head sadly. "Maybe you'd be better off if we took yore checkbook and locked yuh in the cell again," he said. "At least yore heir would profit. No, I reckon you better go back with us, if we can get back, and—"

"Too late!" whispered Speedy. "Somebody is among us."

Somebody knocked sharply on the door. Tombstone, gun in hand, flung it open and a man stumbled in. He was swathed in a slicker, a big Mexican sombrero atop his head. Speedy yanked the door shut behind him. The Mexican blinked at the tableau, trying to figure out just what had happened.

"This here specter looks a heap like Miguel Ortega," Speedy said. "Keep yore hands right where they are, my friend."

"You completed the deal?" asked Sudbury anxiously.

Ortega broke into a torrent of Spanish, which none of them understood. Tombstone lifted the big upturned brim of the sombrero off Ortega's head and poured a pint of water on the floor.

"In English—what happened?" asked Speedy.

"Those peeg!" snorted Ortega. "He ees not got so much money on the bank!"

"Just a moment!" snapped Sudbury. "That is not true. I have at least ten thousand dollars on deposit in that bank."

Ortega shrugged his heavy shoulders and spread his hands.

"W'at can I say?" he asked appealingly. "I weel show you—"

His right hand went into his slicker pocket and came out with a six-shooter. It might have worked with credulous folks, but Tombstone and Speedy were range-wise. Tombstone smashed Ortega on the chin with

[*Turn page*]

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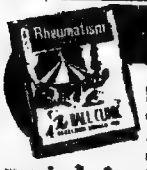

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his right hand, and Speedy kicked the gun out of his hand. It was all over in a split-second. Ortega was sitting on the floor and the gun was at the other end of the room!

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Things start happening when Kirby barges into a fight at the place where the building of a spur line has stopped. Kirby finds that two men are facing five or six. A big bearded man, Tip Garrity, orders him away, but Kirby doesn't go. He talks to a blond man who has been defying Garrity's bunch.

"My name is Hume—Dale Hume," the blond man says. "And I'm chief surveyor and acting engineer for this rail line. The man on the ground there is—was—my helper Frank, that's all I know about him. My linesman. These hombres here—they don't like the notion of a rail spur comin' in Resaca!"

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WE VALUE your opinions, so write and tell us which stories and which authors you liked best in this and other issues of EXCITING WESTERN. Through knowing your likes and dislikes, we are better able to give you just the type of yarns you enjoy most.

Here are excerpts from just a few of the letters we have recently received:

Here is my opinion of EXCITING WESTERN—it is a swell book. The Tombstone and Speedy stories are swell yarns. I like Alamo Paige and Navajo Tom Raine also, and the short stories are good.—*Merle Betzner, Concordia, Kansas.*

I just got a recent issue of EXCITING WESTERN and I like it very much, especially Tombstone and Speedy. I also like GREENHORN OWL-HOOTER.—*Delbert Ponder, Hollansburg, Ohio.*

Just a few lines to tell you to keep up the good work. I think that W. C. Tuttle's stories, particularly those of Tombstone and Speedy, are the best stories in any Western magazines.—*Louise Keller, Mt. Sterling, Kentucky.*

I've always hesitated to write a short story because I figured they had to have a plot to be interesting. By mistake I just read BADMEN ARE PLUMB FOOLISH, in your EXCITING WESTERN. If my school-girl daughter couldn't write a better story I would tell her to give up.—*George Ireland, Lincoln, Nebraska.*

Just finished reading the May issue of EXCITING WESTERN. I thought all the stories were swell. I particularly like GHOST OF THE TUMBLING K, INDIAN SLAP, BADMEN ARE PLUMB FOOLISH, and WIND RIVER HELLER.—*Jerry Carson, Chicago, Ill.*

Thanks to all of you for your grand letters, and let's hear from more of our readers! We like them whether they pack a boost or a knock—both praise and criticism are helpful. Please address all letters and postcards to The Editor, EXCITING WESTERN, 10 East 40th Street, New York 16, N. Y.

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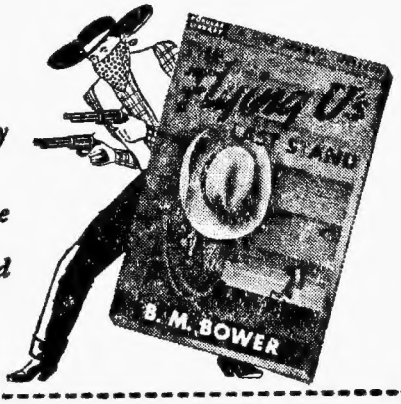

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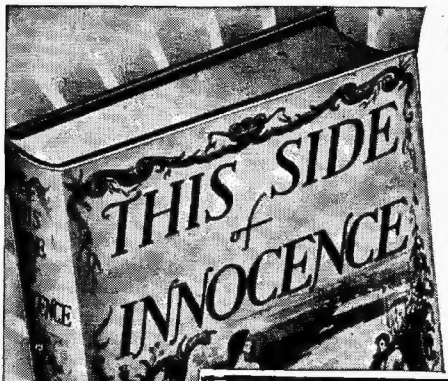

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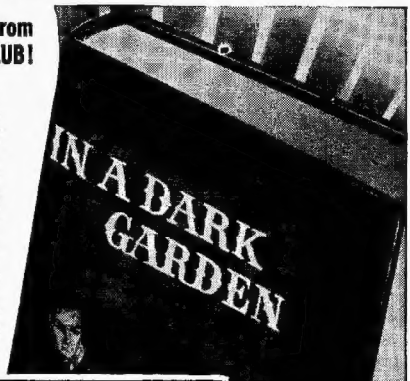

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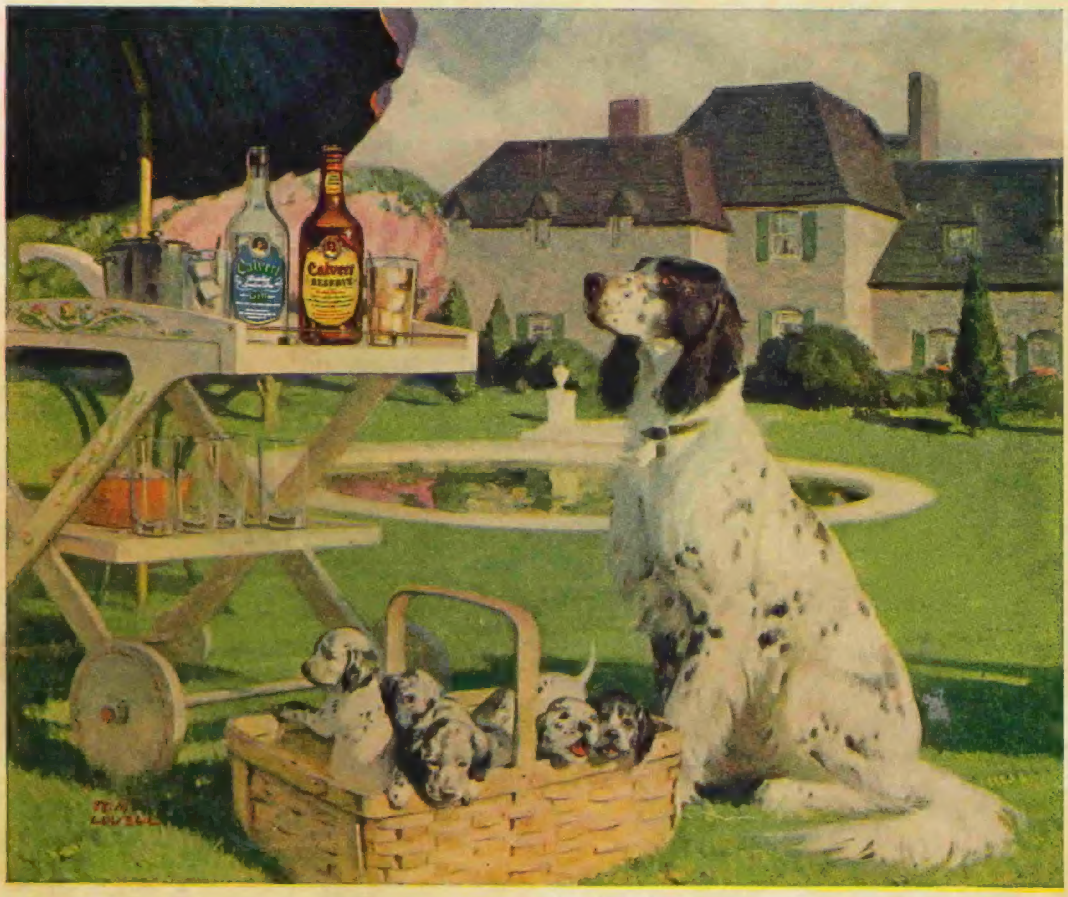

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